

7: Hammer of Thor Chronicles: Once A Spartan

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Summary: Tori may be temporarily out of commission, but Flint can still make ONI think both of them are on-task. At least, until the galactically unthinkable happens... after that, it's all cat-and-mouse all over again.

1. Always A Spartan

01: ALWAYS A SPARTAN

The door opened without a sound, the ever-present soft hiss drowned completely out by the constant thrumming hum of the engines powering through another slipspace theory. That hum would persist until the autopilot found their exit point and tore a hole into realtime to go through, and it was a handy mask for a lot of faint noises.

The cat lay curled in a ball at the forward edge of the middle of the bed, a narrow bunk with a thin, wooden mattress that had learned how to bend despite its nature when pressed upon by the ship's crew. Artemis wasn't under any blankets, which permitted her narrow perch, and she didn't appear to be dozing lightly either.

The woman on the bunk stood an intimidating seven feet nine inches tall when upright, taller than her companion by about three inches. She had honeyed chocolate skin, short jet hair that she was always trying to grow out (but could never seem to get away with it for long) and a long, skinny frame that made her look even taller than she was. Her features were fine-boned, with a delicate brow over almond eyes, a broad, flat nose, high cheekbones, full lips and a small, rounded chin. There was more to her than met the eye, though.

The same could be said for the only other human aboard. Where she was long, lanky and slender, he was stocky, thick, and burled. His arms were bigger around than her thighs, even though her massive height belied her own stout construction. Where she was chocolate, he was a parchment white, where her hair was thick and black as ebon, his

buzz-cut was barely visible under direct, bright light â€" instead, its brilliant golden nature gave his head a soft halo of refracted glow. He had brilliant sky blue eyes, an arched, narrow nose, and square chin. If she were to be called African, he could be called European.

They were children of ONI â€" the United Nations Space Command's Office of Naval Intelligence â€" they were Spartan II's, augmented and trained to be weapons of war.

The ship that carried them was a small sloop called _Whispers of Fate_, but while it could have crewed at a little under a dozen, she, he, and the cat were all that it carried. Many long tales of terror, adventure, endurance and pain had brought them to this moment, the apex of a long, arduous climb out of the war with the since-broken alien Covenant. Events both unlikely and unexpected had guided each to their places, shuffling countless others in the endless game of survival.

Ultimately, that game would not end until it was lost; winning was continuation, never completion. Sprawled on her side on the bed at the back of the small quarter, the sleeping Spartan II looked right at home with her tabby cat. Artemis was a creature that had accompanied her through many bloody conflicts, and still had not run out of lives. If she even had the traditional limit of nine was anyone's guess â€" there had certainly been more than nine brushes with oblivion!

Flint-093 (or 057, depending on which classified ONI record you were looking at) was technically the only one of the duo with proper military background; Tori-138 had lost her immune system at the conclusion of the ORION project's augmentation process, and had spent the majority of her life locked away in an environmentally sealed asteroid laboratory. Flint had found her in there on one of his worse days, but why she had decided to brave the wild expanse of space at his side was a question he'd never asked.

Rather than tempering his persistently bad luck with moderate fortunes, she had instead joined him in them, and had to fight almost as hard as he to survive what crossed their paths. Tori-138 mystified him; and probably always would. But over the short time she had been following him around the stars, she'd managed to grow on him.

That was likely a good thing, considering the cat was hers, but had adopted him in her stead, and had only begun willingly napping with Tori again after their last big mission together. Flint had been found by his long-searching, long-lost identical twin brother, but the reunion had happened in the middle of a Brute infestation, and the two had needed to take down the Chieftain commanding the Brutes before there was any time to visit.

Two things about Tori worried Flint at the moment; the first and foremost was that his hypermetabolic state produced the antidotal treatment to her fragile condition, but she hadn't been taking her booster shots lately. The second was that she was far too pregnant to wear her Mjolnir anymore.

Flint wasn't very attuned to the finer points of child-bearing, but he was pretty sure she ought to be coming due to spit the thing out sometime soon. On top of this, he'd been running solo mini-ops

without her over the last trimester, and each time he suited up and left, he always expected to come back to find it done and overwith, even though it never seemed to happen that way.

He stepped into the room, and almost in tandem, the cat woke up. She extended her forepaws out, and stretched in that contorting way that cats always do, her tiny fangs bared for all the world to see in a jawbreaking yawn. Licking her whiskered lips to finish, Artemis blew a sigh, refolded her front legs, and laid her chin down on them. Her round eyes followed Flint across the room, past the Mjolnir lockers, and the chair that no one ever seemed to sit in.

Whether it was her augmented senses or being disturbed by the cat's moving about next to her, Tori's eyes opened right as Flint stopped moving, a single pace shy of the bed itself. She watched as he reached down and stroked the cat from head to hips, then as the cat tilted her head back and smiled, eyes squinted shut.

Looking up at his face, Tori adopted a partial smirk. "Hello, hero."

He raised a blonde brow. "Is that you telling me to go get myself killed by extraordinary measures?"

The question made her laugh, but she sat up, dropping her legs over the edge of the bed next to Artemis as she did so. Sparing the cat a pet, too, she then cupped her hands under her round belly. "No, that was me being facetious."

"Uh huh." Flint turned around and sat down, opposite the cat from her. Seeing this change in scenery, Artemis stood up, arched her back to stretch, then walked up onto Flint's legs and sat down. He framed her with his hands.

"Going out again?" Tori asked, sensing there was a reason why he'd popped in like this " despite his typical lack of explanation. "What is it this time?"

"You're going to laugh," Flint instructed.

She smiled. "At what?"

He met her gaze. "Innies; can you believe it? After all of thisâ€|_innies_."

Tori did laugh. "Wow, some nerve."

"ONI thinks you're coming alongâ€| as usual."

She cast him a look. "You haven't told them yet, have you?"

"Something in my gut keeps telling me I shouldn't tell themâ€| ever." Flint admitted, watching Artemis roll over and squint at him from her upside down position. He stroked her belly once, and she curled up around his hand. He let her latch on with her claws, let her pretend-bite at the webbing between his thumb and index finger, but she wasn't really hurting him any. It was her way of playing around.

Tori breathed a sigh. "To be honest I don't know how they'd take it, either." Odds were fairly good that she knew nothing of Maria, the II who'd retired and had her own family. But Flint did, and he knew that she was closely monitored by ONI's special branch. On occasion, those observing agents would help her out with mundane tasks when her hands got too full, but the thought of having a half a dozen agents aboard the Whispers with them just because Tori had had a baby was a little unnerving.

That and, the both of them were still active-duty, which would complicate such a situation in ONI's eyes. Flint wasn't quite ready to give up the armor. But for so long as ONI didn't know, then ONI couldn't interfere, in whatever manner they deemed appropriate.

"Mission specs don't look that extensive. I shouldn't have too much trouble. Simple in-and-out op. Nothing fancy like what Frank saw us do."

Tori laughed. "Frank saw us get our asses handed to us."

"What, there's only so much heavy artillery that a suit of Mjolnir can take." Flint argued. "And anyway—we still won, and we still came out alive. But this one's not a frontal assault. ONI doesn't want me to flatten the compound."

"You sound almost disappointed." Tori mentioned.

He looked at her, almost forlorn. "Flattening things is a good therapy for stress."

She smiled, and shook her head. "Flint, someday you're just going to have to get a hobby, or something." Without the cat separating them, it was simple enough for her to scoot sideways, and wrap her arms around his broad shoulders. Resting her chin on one of them, she added, "Bring back a souvenir?"

Flint grinned, amused. "Sure."

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Entering atmosphere worked seamlessly, and there didn't appear to be any prevalent presence of anti-air defenses. Whatever type of insurrectionist base was on the planet below, it must have been the infantry-only kind, or else a well disciplined quiet kind. The Whispers was a fully stealth-enabled sloop, but that didn't qualify it for the kind of cloaking your average Covenant vessel could pull off; look up with naked human eyes, and there she was, big and black and falling through the air.

Pregnant or not, Tori served as a very effective ships' guardian, and the inability to fit into her Mjolnir anymore didn't dampen that at all. She stayed aboard because it minimized the risk of her getting shot at, but if the mission went smoothly at all, the ship would never see any action of any kind, ever. The ship wasn't supposed to participate in the missions anyway, and if Flint didn't screw up so badly as to change that, Tori would never see a single soul.

Disembarkation showcased loudly what kind of landing platform the

computer had chosen as viable; the insect population was either oblivious or uncaring of the fact that an enormous metal thing had just whoomphed into the clearing, and were all chirping, twirdling and buzzing in what Flint felt was an unnaturally amplified manner. Adjusting the external audio input on his helmet didn't seem to make much difference in the impression it gave him, either, which he found slightly disturbing.

Having set aground on a fully colonized world " only partially blasted here and there by Covenant ships " but not on any registered ports would have set off all kinds of things; weather sensors, if nothing else. The amount of wind a sloop the size of a small apartment complex could provide to a small patch of forest was enough to strip all the leaves off the trees and severely distress the grass on the ground. Local meteorology meters would go absolutely nuts; either a popcorn storm had blown into being in less than thirty minutes, sprouted a twister that did a lot of foliage rearrangement and no actual damage, then evaporated, or else a ship had landed.

And ships that did such things without port authority's permission or on port authority sanctioned landing pads always got investigated. The upside of this spot was that it would probably take said port authority a little over two and a half days to get anyone out that remote to investigate.

Flint only needed the first 30 hours out of that time window, because a guy who could move at 50 kph using little more than his legs did not need front-door parking at his venue of choice. Needing little more than four hours to get fully in and fully back out both left him plenty of time to execute the mission.

Per ONI's instruction, his actions inside the Innies facilities would go completely unnoticed by things like seismic sensors, satellite observation and city noise ordinances. Ideally, unless someone ran screaming out the front door and into traffic because Flint was in there, the locals wouldn't find out until the smell came wafting out several days later.

Or someone had ordered pizza" which might crimp his schedule somewhat, but getting arrested just wasn't on the to-do list, and never was there born an inner-city law enforcement official willing to try to apply standard cuffs to a really tall dude wearing a half ton of armor. Flint hadn't really interacted much with civilians " of any stripe " in a very long time, not since the Covenant had invaded. This sudden didn't-get-the-memo Innies base popping up some 35 years after the fact felt nothing short of awkward.

Having been to the other side of sanity, and perhaps not all the way back again, Flint had his doubts about this organization being real insurrectionists " they were likely some brand new notion gotten into the heads of some ambitious outer-colony political leadership folks and Earth-central ONI didn't have the patience to deal with them the old fashioned way. So they sent in a hammer of god to smash an anthill, although Flint also got the suspicion that _that_ detail was more because he was nearby when ONI decided the situation warranted smashing, and not necessarily because they specifically wanted a Spartan to do the job.

More to the point, they expected a pair of Spartans to be doing this

job, which since there would only be one, might screw up the application of firepower versus targets. And having those thoughts to accompany a guy on a brisk run down to the city to go stir up trouble could never end wellâ€|

2. Grant Me This Favor

02: GRANT ME THIS FAVOR

"This place looks nothing like what I remember Human settlements looking like back in the war," Flint mused, aloud, for what felt like the hundredth time. He'd been within city limits for about ten minutes, and still couldn't stop gaping at the scenery.

It wasn't that it was terrifyingly ghetto, or especially utopian, or even post-apocalyptic. It was a decent balance between the grunge at street level and the sparkle of high-wind-scoured skyscrapers up top, as with any city older than a handful of years. But the architecture was bizarre; there were compound curves going skyward, with bell-shaped buttresses holding them to anchored cables, many of which connected to the other towers instead of to the ground. This net of cables thicker around than Flint was, all suspended far above the ground, made the place feel more like a silkworm nest than a Human city.

Worse, the patternless shadows cast by the crisscrossing cables gave the ground an eerie gray pallor that was neither light nor shadow. Flint wasn't sure how he was supposed to feel about being immersed inside such a creation. To start, his skin wasn't even sure if it wanted to crawl or not.

Rather thoroughly creeped out by his surroundings, the Spartan felt a certain sense of relief when he finally made it to what was supposedly his target building, and got close enough to go inside. The industrial docking area wasn't as abandoned as he would have liked, but there was equally enough activity to mask his passage and not so much that he would be noticed. This was if a two-meter green walking tank cruising the city streets hadn't already beckoned notice ahead of time.

Flower decals dotted the shipping containers, stylized and mainly communicated by an outline. The word accompanying this image at first escaped him, until he looked closer, because it was more word art than actual lettering; UNCHAL Co., it said. Flint just shook his head, puzzled and bemused; whatever that was supposed to mean.

Maybe it was a name for a local plant that flowered in a semblance to the blossom depicted. Unfortunately, even his unsocialized self could recall four other flower-decal companies that each produced four very different products. One was an artillery manufacturer, one was a women's cosmetics manufacturer, one made small arms and the other was some kind of cross between a massage parlor and a hard-drugs clubhouse. These were, of course, just the ones Flint had run across while fighting Covenant and Innies as a youth in the days of yore.

He often pondered those days, too. It seemed more and more that being wrung through that bizarre crystalline medical ship had had several more effects than immediately evident. Restoring the scar tissue in

his shoulder to normal muscle structure and healing his open wounds aside, Flint very often wondered if he hadn't been pushed back about two decades' worth of aging and left standing in a young upstart's body while being expected to drive it using a half-centennial's mind. As far as the mirror was willing to admit, he did not appear externally anything more remarkable than healthy " but his insides often told him another story.

Tori was, perhaps, pregnant for this very reason. Breeding viability had not been a concern during the augmentation process of the ORION project. Any tiny detail left awry by the events of his childhood had apparently been entirely reversed and restored to a state of average Human normalcy.

The immediately noticeable enhancements made on his person " such as the visual augmentations that had made his eyes bleed upon application " had changed enough that it struck some doubts. Flint tried not to let himself dwell on those doubts, though.

It was enough that he could resume being a southpaw and shoot the way he had trained to as a boy. It was, he hoped, enough that he could sleep now, and be at least partly rested when he woke in spite of the nightmares, rather than kept raw at his edges because of them. Perhaps there was some neuro-chemical rebalancing also applied? Was it slowly coming back undone, though, given that said nightmares were growing equally as steadily worse as before, only reverted to a previous point before being allowed to continue?

Most of them lingered at waking only as whispers of darkness, pain, and horror. Details eluded in all but the worst of them, all but the ones that made Tori shake him awake. If they were interrupted, it seemed, he could keep a snatch of imagery, and tell himself the story he had been watching with a conscious mind. If they concluded on their own, they would disappear from memory, as if wanting to warn but without details.

'Something very bad was about to happen', however, could be applied to just about every single day of his life. The level of badness of the something generally changed each day, but there was truth to it every single time. Without more information, it was difficult to put a finger on why he felt jumpy and unsettled.

Placated by the crystalline ship's healing at first, Tori was beginning again to question him at length in search for the very answers he couldn't even give himself.

Trying to throw a pregnant woman as big as he was across the room in the middle of the night was not as easy as throwing just the woman had been, though; apparently the swollen belly had also come with cats' claws and Tori could cling to that bed as well as the cat did.

Nowadays, if Flint attacked her in his sleep, it was usually Flint, and not Tori, who wound up on the floor, blinking in surprise. Or, perhaps, he mused, she had just suffered the treatment for long enough that now she was seasoned in dealing with it.

Satisfied with that supposition for the moment, Flint tried to make himself focus on his current surroundings. It didn't really look like a warehouse, now he was away from the docking area and unloading

bays; unremarkable corridors of average measure tunneled through the building in slate blue with a hip-height beige trim about three inches wide on both sides. The overhead lighting was a dual in-line running tube sunk into the ceiling, glowing through flush-mounted glass paneling. All of it was clean, and all of it was undecorated.

Flint frowned at it for a moment; who could bear to work every single day inside this place? The utter sameness of the surroundings would drive a man insane.

Oh. Well, that actually might explain why there was suspicion of insurrectionist activity here. It was all to blame on the dÃ©cor! To that, the Spartan gave a coarse laugh. People condemned themselves to the strangest fates using the strangest tools, it seemed. Even the efficient interior of the _Whispers_ was better put together than this.

Finally, ahead, the corridors ran down a row of what were likely elevators and then opened up into what looked, for the moment, like a lobby with an airlock-style glass front entrance. If that was the actual front door to this drab place, it explained why anyone would ever step foot inside the building in the first place. False advertising! There were people milling through it, too, going into and coming out of the elevator banks. Flint tucked a shoulder to the corner he'd come upon the place from, and watched for a moment.

Business casual seemed to be the dress code for most of them, aside from one guy pushing a mop bucket using the mop that went with it. One wheel on the bucket was stuck pointing the wrong direction to roll smoothly with the rest of them, so it squeaked sequentially as it moved across the floor. That, it seemed, had gone from powder-blue linoleum straight into blue and white marble tiles for the foyer's grand entrance faÃ§ade.

The beige trim at hip-height surrounded the entryways for each of the elevators, and wandered around the corner into the lobby. Where it surrounded the elevator doorways, though, it went from a flat sill to a mitered look, considerably more decorative and giving off what was perhaps a last vestige of that grand foyer before the drab misery of the actual inner workings of the building could take over. No one seemed to actually venture into the building's ground floor, however â€" everyone came as far as those elevators and went in them, or came from them and went straight out the front doors.

Was that, actually, why there was no dÃ©cor back there? Nobody went in there, so nobody noticed that it needed an upgrade? Again, Flint just shook his head. Ah, people. No, wait. Ah, _Humans_. Elites had never seemed to provide this kind of bizarre tendency towards visually damning architecture. Finally, one of the faces attached to the file ONI had forwarded came out of an elevator, talking animatedly with an unidentified middle-aged man, and lent some purpose to Flint being there in the first place.

He let a small, wry smile touch his lips; at least he wasn't going to have to go hunting for everybody. Person number one generally helped with locating persons number next innumerable, and person number one presenting themselves of their own accord helped immensely.

Sound deadened beautifully in the powder and slate blue corridors Flint had come in through, he found, when he sent a command downrange to ensure his first target wouldn't leave before Flint got a chance to talk to him. Everyone else helped out with the man's screaming, though, and almost all of them either tripped over themselves and fell down or else squatted to the floor with their hands " and in some cases, briefcases " over their heads in terror.

The scene looked a little comical to Flint, but he wasted no time in stepping forward to collect the kneecapped target and retreat into the condemning maze of powder blue linoleum and inward-pressing slate blue walls. Whose idea was it to make this place blue, anyway? Weren't most office buildings either beige or tan on the inside? Wasn't there a studied-and-proven psychological reason for that color choice, too? Quick looks about the foyer told him almost nobody had looked up fast enough to see what was making the thunderous footfalls that came and went before he was gone again, which would be useful, more than likely, later.

Having a handful of another man's mouth in one hand and his sidearm in the other, Flint wondered briefly if the target was leaving a droplet trail of blood on the linoleum. The more he kicked and squirmed, the more it really seemed likely. One of the best ways to leave a little blood behind was to fling the bloodied appendage about.

After reaching an agreeable halfway point, Flint dropped the target onto the floor and, for effect, pointed the magnum at his head. The cry of pain choked off almost as soon as it had begun, likely from the assumption that Flint didn't want any screaming.

It wasn't quite untrue, but if the guy spent all his breath screaming, he couldn't rightly spend it talking, which was more what Flint was after.

"Please don't kill me," the guy begged. Closer inspection lent the fellow a little detail to his otherwise painfully average visage; close-cropped brown hair, brown eyes, but his nose was very slightly crooked as if it were broken when the man had been younger, and his average height and build was somewhat ruined now by the utter lack of a knee joint on one leg and, if he by some miracle lived past today, a rather distinctive limp for the rest of his life. "I'll give you whatever you want."

"Nifty," Flint decided, bemused by the offer.

Confusion creased the man's face. "Well? What do you want? What are you after?"

Might as well get to it, then, since target number one was obviously feeling so very cooperative. "Everett Yancy, and Robert Walters. Know where they are?"

The confused look twisted into an obvious war between loyalties; it looked mainly fuelled by the doubts that Flint wouldn't just blast his head open as soon as he got an honest answer. "Do I do I get to live?"

Flint tilted his head. "What kind of question is that? You're living right now, aren't you?"

"No, I meanâ€¦ after I tell you. Are you going to kill me or do I get to live?" He was either trying to drive a bargain, or else feeling out his situation for a proverbial next move. Flint hadn't exactly checked the guy for a poison tooth or anything, after allâ€¦ not that that kind of thing would really slow him down much.

"Let me ask you somethingâ€¦ Carlâ€¦" Flint began, mumbling over the name for a second since he'd read the file and habitually renamed all of the men as a numbered "Target" directly afterward. "What are the odds of your getting anywhere I don't want you to, any time soon?"

As if that was some kind of permission to banter or barter or both, the target â€" Carl â€" took a deep breath and used it to steady his shaking self. That accomplished, and one hand clamped down hard over his bleeding wound, he began with, "I'm not a trouble maker. I'm a business man. I had no idea my clients were performing actions the UNSC considers illegal â€" now I'm not above cooperating fully, but I just want to know if it's worth my time and trouble to do so. Lookâ€¦ whatever you Spartans really areâ€¦ I'm not asking for much. All I want is to go home to my little boy. All I want is to live."

"Hmm," Flint answered, his gunarm never wavering. The rigidity of his posture since dropping Carl was obviously starting to unnerve the man; possibly combined with being crumpled up at the feet of someone so very tall and imposing to begin with.

Carl put his free hand up, palm out. "Please. I'm willing to help you accomplish your mission. Just don't kill me."

Several thoughts swirled through Flint's fractured mind, a few of them actually making it out the other side relatively intact and sensible. Most of those had not been pretty to begin with, though. He dropped the aim of the magnum to his side and said, "Yancy and Walters. Where are they?"

The shield hand came down a little, too, but it tucked to his chest, rather than going to the floor. "Mr. Yancy is on the tenth floor with his task team and my coordinating executives. Walters should be onsite at the locationâ€¦ twenty twenty-one Forrest Avenue, south of the highway. He's got his own task team with him, too, and most of the equipment."

"What kind of equipment?" Flint asked, unmoving.

"Uhâ€¦ mostly construction equipment, but some industrial drillers, too. We're sinking support pylons to the bedrock for a new tower. That's all, I swear. Or that's all I know about, anyway."

Flint was silent for several seconds, unmoving. All Carl could see was his own reflection, rendered in monochrome, in the Spartan's convex visor. Finally, in a slightly quieter tone, he asked, "what's his name?"

Carl hiccupped. "What? Yancy? Or Walters? You already â€" "

"No, your boy."

The businessman blinked, caught off-track. "Whâ€¦ um." He paused to

swallow, flexing his grip on his ruined knee and grimacing slightly for it. "Eric."

Flint's arm came up, and the next round opened Carl's head like a juicy melon, painting much of the floor and parts of one wall in red gore. Again, the odd sound-deadening properties of the slate blue corridor swallowed up the gunshot, and it didn't travel more than a handful of junctions. Doubtless the people up front in the foyer never heard a thing.

Holstering the magnum on his thigh, Flint stepped over the body and walked away, his gait ponderous but meaningful. He felt a distinction had been awarded him for having survived Taramée's horrifying ordeal against the Chieftain, and for having known Tori in the context that he did.

Underneath the pounding nightmares of a future not yet experienced, and the fractures in his soul from a past best left unmentioned, Flint felt an unquestionable certainty that if it had been Flint on the floor under the muzzle of the gun, he would never have shared even a fragment of information about the existence of his child; Carl had not only introduced a theoretical boy, and hesitated to decide what his name should be, but he had also shown no horror around the assumptions based on why Flint would want to know about him to begin with.

Having held the cooling remains of another father's infant child, and the welling weight of his own fatherhood burdening his broad shoulders more every day, Flint never doubted for a moment that Carl had never fathered anybody, least of all a boy named Eric.

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The picking sounds of Mjolnir clad fingers rubbing against one another had taken on a rhythmic quality by the time Flint made it down to the highway of mention. Carl's cranial explosion had left large droplets of organic matter spritzed across the Spartan's gunhand, and their dotted presence had an odd unwelcome tint to his internal mental picture, so he had begun to pick at them "admittedly using the fingers of the afflicted hand" during the trip.

At first, with the droplets being wet in nature, this had only served to smear them until they became thinly applied enough to obtain a transparency he found agreeable. As time wore on, and they dried, though, they would scrape away instead, and he felt the more hard-edged scratch lines he made through their middles he made, the better his vision became in being able to tell how much of each droplet circle was left after each consecutive pass at them.

The construction zone coming into view slowed the rhythmic scratch-scratching, but did not stop it, although he did stop watching the dried droplets as he erased them and picked from memory of their mapped locations instead as he took in the scene ahead of him. This multitasking came a sudden halt, however, when he saw a crane holding a brick of suspended building materials swing in his direction.

Flint pulled the rifle down from over his shoulder and sighted down the scope, first at the crane's payload, then down the reach of the

arm to the cab where the operator was theoretically hiding " if it wasn't a purely robotic crane " and then around the crane's base to see if there was any living bodies about. At first he saw no-one; a shadow over the ground at the edge of the scope pulled his attention over, though, and he saw his first Human of the area.

The fellow was slightly shorter than average, based on the comparison of the equipment around him, just a little overweight around the middle and had one of those upturned noses that just didn't fit with the rest of his facial features. He was not, as it were, one of the marked Targets, but he did seem to be striding with purpose towards a predetermined destination. For the moment, Flint decided to watch, and let him walk, to see if his destination would yield more people.

And, perhaps, Walters.

At the meeting of the fellow with a door, said portal opened to reveal an already occupied passage; there stood a very bullish and masculine-looking woman. The most noteworthy thing about her was the fact that she was wearing the brightest and most garish shade of orange-red lipstick, and it glared badly against her skintone. Flint grimaced; whatever the woman was saying " a short sentence, but out of hearing range " came out so dramatically overexpressed that she had crossed from one end of lip-reading unintelligibility straight to the other.

A lack of lip motion during speech was just as bad as too much of it, and whoever this lady was, she was far too enthusiastic about what she had to say.

The short man at first looked nonplussed, and then frustrated. He spread his arms, made an overlarge shrug motion, and let his arms drop limply to his sides. Neither party seemed to say anything more, but the staring contest perplexed Flint; what did they hope to accomplish with staring mutely?

Finally, the short guy backed up, the woman stepped out and to the side, and three others walked out from the doorway she had been standing in, and more involved chatter was exchanged between them. When one of the new guys pointed a finger squarely at Flint, he jerked back around the corner he'd been standing against, a little panicked.

Nothing happened immediately, so he peered back around said corner to find out why. All five were now walking casually away, at an angle, across the construction zone. None seemed to care that one of their number had just indicated the presence of a serious threat to everyone's health, and judging by the hand and arm gestures, they were still talking to each other.

Odd.

Now a little flummoxed, the Spartan stepped out of cover and forward, pacing carefully closer to the five to see if he couldn't get close enough to hear their words. Coming to the construction zone first instead of going upstairs in the building where he'd shot the first Target was, theoretically, to serve three purposes for the mission.

Firstly, it would cause the fellow upstairs to alert, and thereby flush out, any extraneous individuals privy to the operation. Thus, Flint would know who all and how many of the city's occupants he needed to kill before he could call it done and leave. Secondly, it was important to rile the communications network specifically in use by said organization, equally to allow Flint to find it and tap in, if it even existed outside of normal channels.

The third reason was being annoyingly difficult to track down; a certain level of awareness of the presence of danger " especially if nobody knew what type of danger " was useful, in a Target. Flint had used the tactic in the past, although it had fallen out of use prior to the addition of Mjolnir to his field kit. But this didn't really assist with the issue of an utter lack of actual organizational function. ONI had only said what they wanted him to do with said organization; there had been no mention of what, beyond the accusation of being insurrectionists, they actually did.

Flint, being the ever curious type, wanted to find out before he killed them all. Generally a totally eradicated group usually had a hard time telling its story; kept information never really revealed the whole thing. But an organization that made the realization that its members were being picked off would almost reliably reveal its true function.

What old-style, pre-Covenant insurrectionist factions tended to have in common, no matter how far separated, was the presence of arms. Small, large, both. So far, Flint had not yet seen a single weapon.

Unless that noisy-ass crane was planning to drop it's payload on his head, but that was more a field expedient than an actual weapon. People didn't assemble cranes at arms depots and drive them into battle, after all.

Gaining ground on unarmored people used to living in a civilian environment while wearing a two-legged tank tended to stir them up a bit, though, and Flint found out he'd gotten a little too close, a little too late for it to matter. All five of the people he'd been chasing after turned around at once, each wearing a confused, concerned look at first, and each adopting horror directly upon the sight of him.

Only one, the blunt-featured woman, had the presence of mind to just turn and run for it. Figuring that was enough, and readily able to tell none of the remaining party were his Target, Flint went ahead and shot them each and stepped into a longer stride to keep up with the escaping woman.

Unless she had paramilitary training, she was likely going to more speedily lead him to more people, or if she did, and was currently unarmed, she would at least lead him to a weapons' locker or similar, the particular contents of which would help to shed some detailed light on the nature of his mission. She did, however, turn out to be a fleet-footed thing, however broad-shouldered and unfeminine she was built, and when a glance over her shoulder proved his pursuit, she began trying to more effectively evade by dodging between parked construction vehicles and crates of building supplies.

But despite her nimble-footedness and willingness to duck between

things causing Flint to slide repeatedly in the loose dirt and sometimes gravel, being closer had its own perks; he got to hear it when she activated a formerly hidden earpiece and made an emergency phone call.

"Richard! There's a killer robot down here! Where the hell are those failsafes?"

At first Flint missed a step, stumbling briefly, when he split a grin and chuckled at her.

"Don't argue with me! Just shut it down! Shut it all down!"

Scrolling through the available channels turned up nil, which prematurely ended the humor; Flint did not often find being referred to as a robot funny, but the context helped. Her being on a phone and not a radio was giving his tracer programs a hard time, though, since it had been absolutely forever since he'd been anywhere outside a torn up war zone.

People in war zones did not tend to use phones; and Thor was still sitting in his sock drawer back on the Whispers, so if Flint intended to eavesdrop on that conversation â€" which undoubtedly had to be hilarious, given her frustrated tone â€" he'd have to do it manually, all by himself.

"No, you idiot, the small ones! Get up off your fat ass and look out the damn window!" The woman took an unusual turn and ducked under a tracked vehicle Flint could not immediately identify, but when he circled it, he found she had not stopped once beneath it so the tight space did not prove an inhibitor. She found a door, shouldered into it and shook the handle up and down with all her might twice, then abandoned it for another destination before Flint could get caught up.

Apparently, door #1 was locked. Or jammed. Or otherwise impassible at great speeds and needed more time than she felt she could give it at the moment. Either way, her zig-zagging path had been the only thing keeping distance between them and her sudden bee line across an open area looked as good as wholesale surrender to Flint.

"Now, Richard, now!" The statement was out in perfect timing, completed just before Flint got a hand around her face and pulled both of them to a complete stop.

Lifting her off her feet and tucking her to his side was easy; striding to a stop afterwards while trying not to pummel her lower half to mulch was a little awkward, but he got them under a scaffolding deck just in case she hadn't been joking about the looking out of windows to see their current location. She had both arms wrapped around his, and was wriggling in a most curious manner; she wasn't kicking like she thought she could hurt him, nor like she thought it might slip her free, but she was pawing at his armored glove like she did hope she could peel it off her face.

Uncurling his arm from around her, he propped her against a pole holding up the scaffolding â€" mainly to give her fright a grounding point, so she would hesitate â€" then opened his hand and held it, like that, just a few inches from her face.

"First of all," Flint began, chinning open the external audio ports, "I am not a robot."

Her eyes bugged out of her head and she almost fully doubled over with an exaggeratedly loud inhalation. After coughing in the dust stirred up by their combined running steps, then hyperventilating for several breaths, she straightened back up and stared at him.

Figuring that meant she wasn't going to try to run away again, Flint put his hand down. "Walters. Where is he?"

"Oh my god," she wheezed, clutching at her chest with both hands. "Oh my god,"

"Are you serious?" Flint asked, annoyed.

"You killed them!" the woman blurted, abruptly. While also an unhelpful comment, it did, at least, belay the idea that she was too traumatized to be of use. "Why?"

Reassured thusly, Flint squared his stance. Perhaps chasing her down and catching her had not been a total waste of his time after all. "Better. Nowâ€¦ Walters. I need a location."

Her expression scrunched up. "Why, so you can kill him, too?"

"Actuallyâ€¦ yes." Flint admitted, bemused. "How observant of you."

"Who sent you? What are you wearing?" she ran her eyes up and down his height once, then squinted at his golden visor. "Wait a damn minuteâ€¦"

"Waited long enough, lady." Flint informed her, annoyed again. "Where is Walters? And stop stalling."

The fear had not completely left her face, but she gathered enough courage to spit at him. "I would rather be dead than spend the rest of my life in jail for being an accessory to murder. Go fuck yourself."

Flint quirked a brow, trying to decide how to counter that. She really did have maybe all of three options, following today; be dead, because Flint killed her, be dead because of auxiliary events due to Flint's visit to the site, or be alive but arrested for cooperating enough with Flint to make him not kill her, but by making civil law very angry with her. And she would, as she had mentioned, spend the rest of her life in jail as a result.

Lovely setup, there. No matter what happened, the lady was up shit creek without a paddle. Under those circumstances, asking for compliance out of her did seem a bit much; Flint harrumphed at her. "I didn't say I was going to kill you." He folded his armored arms across his chest, emitting some rather harsh metal grating sounds that fed rather painfully through his external audio ports. "What is your organization up to, down here, anyway?"

"What, this?" She cast their surroundings a glance, looking confused as she did so. "Planting the foundation for a skyscraper? There's nothing special about that. Why do you care?"

"Because I was sent here to make sure it didn't happen, that's why." Flint confessed, still feeling annoyed. "And combat troops are only ever sent to solve neo-political logistics issues when they'll be effective at it."

She sneered at him. "You think killing Walters will change a damn thing? There's years of negotiations, paperwork, permits, contracts, involved here. You'd have to nuke the whole damn hemisphere to shut this down."

"Exactly," Flint allowed. "My superiors don't explain themselves. But they also don't tell me I can't investigate, either."

A different expression flickered across her blunt features, but it didn't linger long; she settled for a disgusted look. "What does it matter? At the end of the day you still have to follow orders."

Flint shook his head. "This is going nowhere." He uncrossed his arms and popped his magnum out of the magnetic locks on his thigh, a motion that seemed to send a rod up the woman's spine, simultaneously straightening and stiffening her posture, and making her eyes get big again.

"Wait, wait!" She gasped out, all at once, hands up. "Walters is in the corporate trailer with the other project leaders!"

The Spartan cocked his helmeted head to one side. "Well aren't you a strange creature today." Unfortunately for the woman, letting her leave with the conversation in her memory would be bad for the mission, and her tendency to spill her guts when under stress was a particularly undesirable trait given the circumstances; letting his prey know they were being hunted was a whole other ball of wax from them knowing who and what and where he was, and what he was up to, specifically.

ONI could be secretive, but this mission was turning into one big ball of confusing SNAFU pretty quickly.

Judgment of the scenario aside, shooting the woman turned into a bit bigger affair immediately than it would be, in the long run, when the bullet tore out of her body and buckled not one but two of the structural pipes holding the scaffolding up over their heads; and apparently, there was something pretty darn heavy up there that was more than willing to come right down.

Flint took a knee under the wooden paneling, and he felt a metal wall of some devising split open around his helmet before it struck his shoulders and made him sit, rather hard, on his own boots. His arms were pinned to his sides, and he was stuck in the sitting position with only a little bit of wiggle room around one hand to work with; everything else was wedged quite firmly.

When the external audio ports came back on after auto-shutoff relaxed its grip against the unholy noise happening around him, he could still hear the metallic groaning of that very large something

settling into its new position on top of him.

After a moment, he chinned on the lights embedded in his helmet, to see if anything was visible from his current position; they illuminated the interior of a metal shipping container, justifying why he felt utterly pinned down. On the plus side of the situation, however, the thick corrugated metal walls of said shipping container was all that held him, and the power behind his powered armor was probably stronger than the sheetmetal.

Probably.

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Watching a satellite feed of her shipmate's antics, Tori was long since done scratching her head; whatever line of logic Flint was using today, it was indecipherable to outside observers.

He generally deactivated his helmet cam, but he'd been known to fail to notice it being back on again some days. Concern about deeper repercussions of the same behavior that made him kick her out of bed at odd hours of the night had her making random attempts to spy on him at other intervals â€" not because she didn't trust him to do what he claimed, but because she felt she needed more context for the things he did do.

Like today.

So far, the helmet cam feed wasn't really shedding any light, although it was proving to be quite the disturbing watch. Flint appeared to be treating this quick in-and-out op like he was in Brute territory, and everyone he came into contact with as potential combat hazards to be dealt with efficiently now, or inefficiently later.

Why he'd felt the need to shoot the woman â€" who had, admittedly, been unhelpful, but that was the greatest of her crimes as far as Tori could tell â€" was a mystery. That his attention was so unfocused that he'd aimed the round squarely at the structural load-bearing pipes behind her had more ugly things to say than the fact that he'd decided to shoot her in the first place.

It meant shooting random â€" innocent or otherwise, all told â€" civilians was going to be the least of her worries when Flint's condition reached its peak.

She worried about his health, about where this was coming from and why he wasn't seeking treatment â€" not pursuing respite for the pain was clearly a bad sign, regardless of the condition in question, right? â€" but most of all, she worried what was going to happen when their baby was finally born.

Would the added stress of having the child around and needing to care for it tip him over, or would it even make an impact, given his current ability to process his environment? Did she dare trust him at all, anymore? He had not tried to hurt Tori while consciousâ€¦ ever, actuallyâ€¦ but that exception hadn't seemed to extend to anyone else.

Even his friends among the Elites. He'd gone to the trouble of

beating Anuna's copy to death by hand, all while believing the robot was the real guy. That kind of event was indescribable, to Tori, but that was where Flint was, and he didn't seem to be getting any better.

Being run through whatever kind of repair method the Elite had used had quieted much of the problems Tori could see on the outside, but only for a while. He'd been able to sleep motionless the full night through for only a handful of months. Then the nightmares came back â€" or at least got bad enough to stir him from sleep again. His perception of time, space, and logic had straightened, if marginally, but was warped all to hell once again, and like the rest of her observations, was nothing short of disturbing.

She often wondered what was happening â€" what was really going on â€" but aside from being legitimately psychic, there was truly no way shy of Flint finding the words to say it to her for her to find out. And if there was one thing this spiral into darkness had not done, it was make Flint a talker.

He'd never been a talker. Never told stories. Tried so hard to get away without writing mission reports. That had not changed.

Other things around him had changed; the Schism seemed to be the only one he understood. Closing her eyes for a moment, Tori ran her hands over her swollen belly, trying to massage away the dull, throbbing ache that had grown a fondness for her hips lately. Flint was invisible to the satellite feed at the moment, being buried under the heap of wreckage that had been a couple of shipping containers and a crane deck before he'd brought it down on top of himself, and his helmet feed was a fuzzy mess since it was trying to come through the metal walls of what was probably one of those containers. Until he got himself out of that mess, there wasn't much to look at, and Tori had concerns that were a lot closer to home at the moment.

Concerns that, very suddenly, reached panic level when what felt like a dagger of ice grew out of one hip and reached for the other, doubling her over in her seat.

When she regained her breath, Tori looked up at the screens, wearing a grimace. Her first attempt to reach for the comn was stymied by a second dagger, forcibly curling her inward on herself.

"Fuck me," she gasped, clawing at the console in front of her. Despite everything being well within arm's reach, it felt like it was all a million miles away and she didn't have the strength to get to it.

"You," she breathed, catching the lip of the console at last, "you did this to me, Flint," she growled, pulling with all her might just to close the gap of a few inches. "You better damn well be here to finish it!"

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"So, is this revenge or karma?"

The comment came out his mouth before he even realized he'd thought it first, and he emitted a sarcastic half-laugh afterwards in response to himself for having said it out loud. The shipping

container seemed to be empty, either completely or mostly, because wriggling free of the wall on it that he was stuck through did not barrage him with any loosened, tumbled contents.

This proved beneficial to his mood, although being forced to wriggle _into_ said shipping container rather than _out of_ it, due to the other direction involving digging a really big hole through the dirt, did not. Once he was finally free of the sheet metal, he found places to brace his feet and had a more detailed look around; "up" appeared to align decently with the crate's doors, but they looked like they had been shut properly, and that meant he'd need to break the hinges or something else creative if he meant to pass through that way.

For a moment, he wished he had brought some plastique, then he shrugged it off and slammed himself into the doors using his formerly good shoulder as the ram. Habit, required or not, died hard, and despite having allowed himself to go back to being a leftie when it came to things like shooting, he still tended to favor his left shoulder sometimes for some of the oddest actions.

Leading a body slam with the non-dominant side of the body was always awkward and rarely hit the exact mark intended, but in this case it did get the job done when he managed to warp both doors badly enough to push one of them open. The other was domed suitably to look like Flint had been after it, but he ultimately only needed one of them to open to have enough room to pass.

Figuring there was no sense in subtlety following a breakout like that, he just leapt off the upturned edge of the container's lip, and down onto what remained of the scaffolding's wooden decking. Now he was out, and on top of it all, it looked to have been the decking for the crane that had been making all that noise; and pausing to look up at said noisy crane, he realized belatedly that that was possibly a bad idea.

The squeal of suddenly freed metal cabling struck him first, but his attempt to leap away was too slow and the steel beam crashed down across his back and pinned him back to the wreckage. Flint struggled against it for a moment, aware the only reason he hadn't been squashed in half at the waist was because the beam had pinned him to the top of an unsettled pile of debris and had thus permitted him to make a Flint-shaped dent in it instead of crushing him between two hard surfaces.

Mjolnir was great stuff, but it wasn't indestructible.

Abruptly, his roving channel-surfing algorithm locked onto a radio signal, and it said, "I got him! Everyone get out now, while he's stuck!"

Stuck? Well, okay, yes, he was stuck. For the moment, anyway. But that he'd evidently managed to make more of a splash with his targets than he'd intended to " or maybe that phone call the woman from earlier had actually done its job " was what was more irksome.

Flint grumbled to himself, unable to move the beam and aware it was sinking slowly in the scaffolding and it was pushing him down with it. So unless he was able to somehow lift the beam again " it was still hooked to the cabling on the crane, after all " or dig out

the scaffolding beneath himself without simultaneously digging out all of it at once, Flint was going to stay stuck.

He pondered how he was going to get out of this one, aware there was very little hard-shell armoring around his midsection; certainly nothing that circled his torso like the upper chest armor did, creating a solid halo of stiff material that would prohibit a crushing action. Contrarily, his middle was armored piecemeal, and they would flex against one another quite easily under pressure.

Which was bad for Flint if that beam ever hit bottom. Fortunately, the beam was so heavy, and its crushing action on the scaffolding heap was so efficient, that the shipping container from earlier tipped the other way and came sliding down the new slope to get them both.

The open door snagged a bent pipe between start and finish and swung wide open, screaming the whole way out, and the container turned on a slight angle and suddenly rolled, dropping the full weight of the metal shipping container against the cabling attached to the cross beam for almost a full three seconds.

The beam jumped upward against the physics playing out between everything involved, and for just a heartbeat, Flint was free enough to escape. Aware of the beam's departure from his back, and acutely aware of why now he was in the dark again, he kicked against the compressed pipes and wooden boards " or mulch, depending on how one looked at it " trying to escape before his window closed again forever.

The shipping container had momentum on its side for only a short while; it did not weigh enough to hold the beam aloft while at rest. All that would do was keep tension on the cables, and little else. Scrambling on his belly and attempting to get to hands and knees amid the chaos, Flint managed to get almost all the way free, and then the beam came down again and caught an armored boot.

Dragged to a stop shy of success, Flint didn't have time to complain beyond a grunt when the cables displayed a sudden springiness that sent the shipping container back the way it had come; it struck them from a different angle when it returned, since at the apex of its retreat the foot end jumped forward a full foot's span before it came back down.

This time, Flint got his feet free and his helmet knocked soundly simultaneously. Content to wobble against the shuddering cables, the shipping container was emitting a resonant metallic sound that sealed the deal for Flint's brains, and gave him a terrible headache. One hand clutching at his helmet ineffectually, the other pawing at the tangle of compressing pipes and breaking plank boards, the beleaguered Spartan managed to finally extract himself from the mess he'd gotten himself into.

And according to his mission clock, he'd done all of it in the span of about twelve minutes.

"Note to self," he grumbled, squinting one eye against the resonating pain in his skull, "don't shoot women."

All told, she had been the first female something he'd killed in more than a decade; the aliens of the Covenant just didn't send them to battle, and he hadn't set foot in one of their civilian environments that hadn't already been strafed from orbit. And if sparring with Tori had been intended as a lesson in what not to do, getting tangled helplessly in scaffolding, shipping containers and structural cross beams sure hammered it home.

Standing up at the edge of the collapsing mess he'd made out of the crane's decking, Flint found himself staring down a fire team's worth of civilian police. It looked like full kit, too, because they were wearing body armor, and had helmets on, and were holding rifles instead of sidearms. Still, it was the kind of team one would send to rout drug runners or illegal tech traffickers â€" not the type of containment units one ought to send to handle a full-kit combat unit like a Spartan II.

"You're shitting me, right?" Flint asked, incredulous.

"Put your weapons on the ground and your hands on your head!" came the answer, spoken very seriously.

"_Flint!_" his radio picked that time to chime in, using Tori's voice to do it, and boy did she sound unhappy. Was it something he did, again? When would it end?

"I don't have time for this," he groaned, aware he'd lost his magnum in the rubble and had only his rifle left to work with. That was okay; he'd need the firepower to get through their armor. The sound of civilian arms' rounds zinging off his shields combined with the sound of people screaming at one another, screaming in general, and running for cover in all directions under the responding staccato of his own rifle's barking voice.

The people on this planet, Flint mused quietly, were pretty universally quick-footed. So far everyone he'd seen running was good at it, and roughly half the guys downrange made it to cover before the other half all died. A smoke grenade was thrown into the mix of rising dust, but it didn't hamper Flint much with the IR-capable visor settings his armor had to offer. It did make judging cover effectiveness harder, though, and he put a few rounds into things he couldn't see and that did the job they had been chosen for by those hiding behind them. It didn't take long before those who had chosen cover poorly were all dead, and only those who had chosen correctly remained. Bullets zinged about blindly, though, so Flint took the moment of poor visibility to remove himself from the crossfire position.

"_Flint, I don't want to hear it! You get your ass back to this ship right now!_" Following the demand, Tori let out a very peculiar sounding howl.

Flint scrunched his face up as he circled to get around two cops' effective barricade. Was the cat clawing the skin off one of her legs just then? That was a funny noise to be making over the comn. "Tori, not now." He felt, just a bit oddly, very calm right then. Maybe it was the combat.

Combat had always served to calm his demons, and let him focus.

In response, Tori just screamed at him. It sounded one part indignant, one part fury and eight parts cat-on-the-leg. The mix proved puzzling. Not only had Flint not known Artemis to be so aggressive, why would Tori just sit there and allow her to use her leg as a scratching post? Usually if the cat got too adventurous with her claws on Flint, he would easily shove her off to make her stop. She was a tiny creature, after all.

Flint tried switching channels to get rid of the unnecessary noise in his ears, but that only bought him a few minutes of peace. Stalking the final policeman, Tori came back on the line, having evidently gotten the cat to stop long enough to find the new channel.

"_Flint, please. I need you,_" she was saying, now in an altogether brand new tone of voice. Now, she sounded worried, frightenedâ€| and was begging.

Utterly confused and distracted, Flint caught a full magazine of small arms' fire in the face before he realized why, and shot the source of the rounds to make it stop. His shields had done their job, though, and not a single shot had gotten to his armor. Which was good, because having his head speared through a shipping container's wall and then getting a structural beam dropped on his back had snapped them, and left some very shiny marks all over his green paint job.

Aware he had a few moments to try to figure out what was going on at Tori's end, Flint stopped where he stood and let his hands reload the rifle while his mind focused on the problem. Had she overreacted, and thrown the cat so hard that she'd killed her? Shameâ€| she was a sweet kitty, and her purr could be soothing. "Tori, what the hell."

"_I don't know,_" she began, sounding breathless, now, too. "_I think something is wrong with the baby._" Not a good string of words to hear, inside or out of combat. Flint grimaced. Great timing, Tori. "_Everything hurts._"

Flint sighed, the throbbing in his skull no lessened by time. "What am I supposed to do about that? I'm not a doctor."

"_Come back to the ship?_" she suggested, her breath hitching once or twice. "_I can't do anything. I can't stand up, I can't see straight. I don't know what's happening to me. Please, Flint, I need you._"

Grumbling to himself briefly, he relented; "Alright, alright, give me a minute. I'm two and a half hours out no matter what I do and they've started shooting at me so I can't come this instant anyway. Hold tight and try not to die before I get there."

That seemed to satisfy her, at least, because he got a whispered "_Okay,_" before the telling click of her closing her end of the channel.

His assessment of the situation proved a little truer than he'd meant it, though, when a SWAT helicopter spotted him through the blowing dust and grenade-smoke, and rained bigger bullets down on him. Startled, Flint jumped away, and began to run back to the crane when he decided that was not likely a safe place to take cover considering

what had brought down the decking around it, and changed directions mid-way there. The resulting zig-zag threw off the gunner in the helicopter, allowing Flint time to figure out where he was actually going to go.

Calling up the mini-map of the construction zone he was in, he picked out what he hoped were the executive trailers the woman had mentioned and went that way. Dealing with the helicopter could wait, since it was not a military grade vehicle and therefore only a minor problem, but he did have ground to cover and now Tori was having some kind of medical crisis and he had promised her he'd go back to help her deal with it.

So time was now in a crunch, and he couldn't do things the way he had been. Not that he could, anyway, since he'd apparently gotten sloppy enough to get the police involved. ONI was going to have a field day when they heard he'd shown up all over the police radar, and doubtless they would want to do something disciplinary.

Sigh.

In this case, however, the sudden loud and obnoxious fact of his presence in the area had loosened a lot of inhibitions, and when he made it to the trailers " they looked like RV's, up close " he managed to catch sight of the last of their occupants shoveling themselves into civilian cars, their arms full of rolled up papers. Probably site blueprints, or similar.

Flint flung grenades at all of them, lighting the parking lot up like the fourth of July. Shrapnel from the cars pelted his shielding, but the light show had attracted the helicopter and Flint had just a moment to recognize a disfigured, severed head tumbling past as Target #2 before he had to go.

So the good news was the mission was still getting accomplished. The bad news was the odds of him ever finding Target #3 after today were abysmal, and his choice to leave the guy behind when he was a mere elevator ride away was looking less and less like a smart one.

But today had been shitty, anyway, so Flint turned to see about dealing with that bothersome helicopter so he could be on his way. Shooting out the blades worked to an extent; the damage done was honestly minimal, but the couple of rounds that had missed had apparently struck the front shield dome and fractured it. Either he'd managed to shoot the pilot or else had panicked the guy pretty good, because the otherwise fine helicopter made a sideways parabolic arc and came down to the ground.

Flint stepped into a trot to meet the crash site, unwilling to leave survivors. He didn't want to get chased out of town, and certainly did not want to lead anybody back to the sloop. Arriving at the crash site, Flint found the vehicle had apparently made a pretty soft landing, even though it was tipped up partially to one side. Sure enough, the front view shield was a spiderweb-cracked mess, and the inside of it looked like someone had splashed it with something goopy. The color was obscured effectively, though, so Flint couldn't tell if it was blood or not, but any other occupants were gone already.

This presented a small inconvenient problem. If they were better at

hiding and tracking than him, he would spend an ungodly amount of time trying to rout them from their places in this roughened environment, and Tori would be either dead or extremely angry by the time he made it back to the sloop. Although in retrospect, perhaps a two hour delay for the kind of medical emergency that would make that woman squall like that would leave her dead or very angry anyway, even if he left right that instant.

Flint shrugged at the thought, and circled the downed bird. Only one blade remained intact, the others sheared off by either his bullets from earlier or the sideways landing, and it stuck straight up into the sky. How the superior weight of the suddenly larger blade had not caused the rotation point to turn around, he wasn't sure, but it remained locked in place, like a mechanical middle finger in retribution for being shot down.

Eventually he spotted a couple of boot tracks that were on top of the helicopter's landing spray of dirt, suggesting they had been made either during or directly after the crash. These led to a collection of shipping containers not unlike the one Flint had discovered the interior of earlier, but all of these were sitting directly on the ground. One had open doors, but the rest looked shut. Closer to them, the dirt became hard packed, as if it had been stamped down by heavy machinery, so the boot prints disappeared entirely; Flint was still leaving shallow marks of passage, but that tended to happen when one dropped a half ton of something on an area that was approximately two feet long by one foot wide. Mjolnir boots were not small things, but given the load seated on top of them, their size could still make an impression, even in some cretes. Residential area sidewalk material was the worst about crumbling, but there was none of that stuff here.

Raising the rifle, Flint strode carefully between the first two shipping containers, for some reason finding himself expecting a Brute to jump out. Shaking the image out of his head, he tried to focus on the task at hand; the longer this drew out, the worse reality seemed to warp, and it was getting harder and harder to stay on-task. Wind pushing through the arm of the crane overhead made a terrible whispering howl sound, and the faint thrumming from the shipping containers around him didn't help. He was reminded of the brief interlude between the shockwave from the armada overhead and the collapse of the shoreline around him, back on Delta Halo, and when the tone changed slightly to include a metallic creak " and a strange twang when the crane's loose cabling snapped to the side in the wind " he suddenly wondered if there would be Flood about shortly.

Creepy post apocalyptic ghost town environment only ever meant Flood in the area, but he was pretty sure if there was going to be Flood here, there would be more UNSC presence than just himself.

And so far, he hadn't managed to spot any.

Around the curve of the first shipping container, a thin waft of leftover grenade smoke blew past, a handful of loose dirt granules stirring along the ground as it went. Flint paused to watch it go, narrowing his eyes at the faint greenish tint that smoke carried.

"Aw, fuck me." Flood was just the last thing he needed, but that was

a typical behavior of the parasitical organism; show up when it was most inconvenient for Flint.

Spotting a black armor-clad Human clutching a rifle and leaning against the third container " and looking the other way with nervous body language " so completely matched the developing picture that Flint first checked to see what the guy was looking towards before saying anything.

"You alone?" He looked alone. Looked lost. Probably felt about as up shit creek as many soldiers did, when separated from their units during combat. It tended to get worse when Flood turned up, too.

The fellow spooked all to hell and gone and jumped clean out of his skin, twisting in mid-air like a frightened housecat before coming down on his ass and losing his gun in the process. "Shit, shit, shit, shit!"

"Hey, calm down," Flint issued, mildly amused. "Could be worse."

As if finally making the realization that the big green thing that had snuck up on him was not, in fact, a Flood form, the fellow paused. "What inâ€|? You're a Spartan?" He sounded incredulous.

Flint thought about the question for a moment. Variations of that reaction had played out time and again throughout his military career; generally, it was because Spartans were so few and far between, but mostly because it was hard to believe that out of all the odds, one would show up where _they _were. He shrugged. "What else would I be?"

"What are you doing _here_?" the guy asked, grabbing his rifle and picking himself up. Fool stood with his back to the open, rather than regaining the side of the shipping container, but the fellow was probably still out of sorts after that display he'd given.

"Situation called for it. You never answered the question."

"What, about being alone? I don't know about being alone," the fellow answered. His insignia was sparse and confusing; Flint couldn't even tell if the guy had a rank. He certainly wasn't wearing a name anywhere on his armored exterior, but it didn't look quite right to be a Marine. Special Ops, maybe? Infiltration unit? Flint hadn't seen much of that branch, so he supposed it was possible. "I came here with a full unit to answer some damned odd chaos in the area. I never expected to find a Spartan."

"Chaos doesn't even begin to describe this area, at the moment." Flint mused, tilting his head to check that far corner of the shipping container. Just in case, he also checked his motion tracker, but for now all was still. "What kind of population does this area have, and what are the main avenues of transportation?"

"What?" He said it like he couldn't believe Flint would ask such a question.

"You know what Flood is?" Not being able to read the guy's equipment was starting to wear on Flint's nerves. Getting spotty cooperation

out of him wasn't helping.

Mention of the parasite seemed to fix that, though; he went visibly rigid. "Oh god. Is that why you're here? There's a Flood outbreak? How did it get here?"

"Flood tend to drop their ground troops in calcite rocks. I wouldn't be surprised if it looked like a small asteroid â€" no bigger than a jeep, generally." Flint answered. "You don't get out much, do you?"

"I've gotta radio that in," the fellow decided, suddenly, clutching at his equipment suddenly in search of said radio. "You good to handle containment while I do that?"

"Sure am," Flint said, feeling a little better now. If there was reinforcements to be had easily then he could probably go ahead and leave and see what Tori's problem was, but he didn't think letting this guy see him do it would make him any braver. So now his goal was to get out and not be seen doing it. Regular troops tended to wrap their morale around Spartan presences; when one disappeared or wandered off the emplacements of troops left behind would invariably become antsy and twitchy.

And while it was not a terrible state of being to be in when dealing with Flood â€" being on one's toes always helped â€" it wasn't exactly healthy to have one's morale gutted first, either. So Flint stepped around the container pretending mightily that he was going back to work on the problem, and when he was certain he was out of sight of the strange black-clad guy, he popped off a few rounds for theatrical effect, then turned and took a good, short route out of there.

Let the regulars deal with that issue. Flint wasn't terribly fond of Flood, especially since he'd been practically the only Human to ever survive infection. That had not been a pleasant experience, and it had only ended after getting the ever living daylights beaten out of him by a robotic copy of one of his friends â€" he still wasn't sure how it had ended, but it had, and he wasn't about to protest.

He could, however, protest being made to go back and face more Flood. Flint suppressed a shudder. Hopefully that problem could be taken care of on its own, and without Flint's help. Mentally he grumbled that ONI hadn't been forthcoming about that detail before they'd sent him in, in the first place.

Maybe they didn't know? Maybe intel was spotty, and all they knew was there was a problem of some kind? Flint sighed through his teeth. It would figure, he supposed, that he would be the sucker who got the call to deal with an unknown problem that, once known, turned out to be Flood.

He decided right then and there that, regardless of Tori's state of decay or fury, he was taking the Whispers and flying away from this place just as fast as he could make it go. It was perhaps the first time in his life when extricating himself and leaving was actually an option.

03: ONI SAYS JUMP

Making tracks through the outskirts and then the hills to get back to the sloop where he had left his fellow Spartan II took what felt like forever. Flint hadn't heard anything else on the radio from her since the first couple of calls, but the mission clock hadn't ticked off that much time.

Had something actually happened, or had he imagined the whole episode? Would he arrive back at the Whispers only to be greeted by a surprised look from Tori and questions about why he'd cut the mission short? She didn't know his patterns, but she was smart enough to be able to guess how long it should take him to get it done.

Puzzling over such thoughts as he made the journey, Flint circled the landing struts of the sloop and toggled the hatch to open. He stood still for a moment as it came down, the foot settling into the stirred leaves before he started up the steps. Most days he was halfway into the ship before it was even all the way open, but at the moment, he felt everything was so awry that jumping ahead just seemed like a bad idea. He needed a moment or two to collect his thoughts first; it didn't really help that said thoughts were all over the place.

Changing to being the one being flung out of bed while still asleep had put perspective on a few things, to start. Tori's slow amorphous change from spitfire to mellow but dangerous had kept him on edge. She was strange to start with, but this—the acid at the edges of his mind made it hard to figure out. She had changed, slowly, gradually, becoming someone else. Flint wasn't sure how to react to that, or if he was even supposed to.

Stepping back aboard the Whispers for the first time since that morning, Flint paused to take it in. The entrance bay was empty of unusual, noteworthy changes; it was also quiet, and it remained that way even after he'd sealed the exterior and opened the interior airlock. Silence pervaded, it seemed, through the entirety of the ship. Finally, after several dozen uncounted heartbeats, Flint heard a small thump sound, like a small object with neither rolling nor bouncing properties had hit the floor.

The cat?

Flint tapped the fingers of one hand idly against the empty magnetic grapple plates on his thigh armor where his missing magnum was supposed to be, thinking. He had never known the Whispers to actually whisper. But now it seemed to be doing just that. Reaching up, he unlatched his helmet, and lifted it off his head. Once it was tucked under an elbow, he began the slow, observant walk up the corridor into the depths of the sloop, looking for where his only companions might be hiding.

The walking seemed to help calm his nerves, though the silence still tingled at his edges. Idly, he wondered what he would find; Tori had never been quite this absent in the past. She could play at being distant, sure. But even she had her limits, and with the engines on a cool spin — off, in layman's terms, without actually being shut completely down — the ship was quiet enough that even Flint's

walking had a soft echoing ring to it. Each step rattled down the breadth of the corridor, advertising his location.

Finally, a sign of life showed itself, at the juncture where the corridors to the engine room and the main feed to the front of the ship met. Artemis walked, quiet like a ghost on her fuzzy paws, around the corner, her tail hung outward behind her in indication of opinionated observation.

Flint paused where he stood to look at the cat a moment. Seeing him stop the cat stopped also, and took a moment to lick at the inside of a wrist. The motion drew Flint's attention to the sticky, matted fur on all four of the cat's paws, although where she could have gotten a substance that met those criteria was a mystery. Even the biologically beneficial substances that were aboard that could possibly do that to cat fur were all sealed away inside tubing that was damn near Spartan-proofâ€¦ no way a tiny housecat could get one open.

Flint quirked a brow, trying to figure that detail out. If she had been, as previously guessed, clawing the skin off Tori's shins, her complexion ought to be at least mildly colored. It wasn't â€" whatever substance was all over the cat was predominantly clear. At that point she decided to lift her tail, the very tip curled over like a pointing finger, and come forward to rub her head and sides across one of Flint's armored boots. He watched her do it, bemused by the gesture, but couldn't even feel the gentle push of having been head-bonked on the shin. Mjolnir would do that.

Reaching down with his free hand, Flint scooped the cat up off the floor, and set her inside the collar of his chest armor, where she promptly head-bonked him in the face and made him laugh. "Happy to see you too, kid," he told her. "What'd you do with the other Human aboard, hm?"

Now she was making skin contact, he could tell her sticky paws also had a smell â€" and were actually still sticky, and not dried on and simply matted down. He grimaced briefly when he felt some of that unknown stuff come off on his chin. Yuck. But it smelled vaguely familiar; whatever it was, it rang eerily similar to the type of stuff found on Human innards. But, like connective tissues or fat deposits, or the way the inside of a freshly peeled skin smelled. Not like blood, not quite like muscle tissue. This explained, though confusingly, why there was no color on the cat's matted fur.

It wasn't bloodâ€¦ it was something else.

Pulling the cat away from his face to spare himself more of the sticky goo, Flint began to walk again, helmet in one hand and cat in the other, around the corner from which Artemis had come. At first he thought he ought to check out Medical, because that was where such smelly, sticky substances ought to be â€" ideally â€" but at the other end of the corridor that smell was now in the hallway, and no longer just on the cat.

And he was nowhere near Medical.

Brows meeting, Flint turned to follow the smell, eventually winding up in the fore section just aft of the bridge, and it was there he finally found Tori. She was seated on the floor, propped partially

against one wall, her arms folded over her front like she felt a need to hold her chest together with them. There were smears, some thick, some thin, of the clear substance everywhere, including all over her arms and her clothes.

He leaned over to put the cat down when she looked up at him, still wearing his puzzled expression from earlier; "It stinks in here," he greeted, perhaps tactlessly.

Tori hiccupped at him, her own expression going from oddly neutral to mildly annoyed. "No, _I _stink in here. And so does Junior." At that proclamation, she held aloft a baby "their baby" still sopping in partially dried amniotic fluids.

Flint felt himself do a double take; not because he was shocked to see a baby, but because the sight of it sent shuddering chills through his large frame as part of a horrifying memory surged upwards. The last time he'd seen something so small, so young, and so fragile, it had died, and it had been his fault for thinking he could fight with the one holding it. When nothing immediately otherwise similar to that event occurred again, he felt able to take a breath to steady his nerves, and focus back on the present.

Tori's annoyed look morphed into puzzled concern. She tucked the baby back down into the crook of an elbow, where it emitted the oddest sounding mumbling noises. "Flint, are you okay?"

"No," he blurted, before he was even sure he wanted to answer that question. Now it was out, though, and there was no taking it back. He sighed. "Why are you sitting on the floor?"

To that, Tori shrugged, dismissive. "It's as far as I got before I couldn't crawl any farther. I started out in there," she jerked a thumb at the semi-distant door to the bridge. Faint smears of blood mixed with the amniotic fluids were all over the walls and floor between that door and where she now sat. It took until then for Flint to realize that she was also, at the moment, not wearing any pants. Their current location was not immediately evident, but she could be sitting on them, or have left them on the bridge.

Having the ship pretty exclusively to themselves for so long had lent certain degrees of efficiency and random nudity to the daily routine. It was not uncommon to wander about clothed, half-clothed, or unclothed, and it was for this reason it had taken that long for Flint to notice the detail; it simply wasn't unusual enough to warrant note.

"Wait," he scrunched his face up, watching as Artemis trailed paw prints through the amniotic fluids on the floor around Tori, tail still erect like a little flag. "Is this what you were bawling about on the comn earlier?"

Tori huffed a sarcastic laugh. "Two hours ago, sure. Help me up; this stuff is actually kind of nasty and the kid came prepackaged in a lot of it."

"Yeah, it looks like you got it everywhere. Even on the cat." Flint agreed.

"Hey, that part is her fault!" Tori defended. "She _wanted_ to get

involved."

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After Tori and the so-dubbed "Junior" had been put through the shower, all associated laundry items shoved into the wash, and the vast majority of the nasty stickiness scoured off the deck, the four of them wound up gathered in the quarter the former three had shared.

"He looks like you, except a little darker," Tori mentioned, her eyes half-lidded as she stroked her fingers over the baby's bald head. She had chosen to sprawl on the bed, flat on her back for the first time in six months, the baby trapped in a makeshift birdsnest shaped out of a handy blanket near her head. He was a squirmy little thing, and while he certainly lacked language skills, he was also predominantly vocal.

Flint had gotten tired of the endless dialogue a while ago, but apparently Junior was still fascinated by his own vocal chords. Grumbling a little as he sat down in the chair next to the door "it was seeing some use, nowadays, and he was glad for its presence" the cat immediately invited herself to his lap the instant it became available.

Dropping both hands over her when she laid down there, Flint heaved a sigh, pushing his mouth to one side. "Is he ever going to shut up?"

"I don't know," Tori admitted. "He's kind of the first new baby I've ever met. None of the articles I read mentioned anything about how much or how often babies vocalize. Maybe it's something you learn from social exposure in a civilian setting."

Flint grunted, a little disinterested. "Well, he can't sleep there every night."

Tori gave a small laugh. "He won't sleep at night at all, Flint." She turned partway to see him. "Not for the first handful of months, at least. He'll catnap kind of like Artemis does. His digestive system is too short to keep a sustainable amount of sustenance aboard for very long at all, and from what I read, if you don't feed new babies often, they tend to scream."

"Great, screaming," Flint grouched. "Just what I need." He poked his head with a finger, indicating its contents. "I was hoping the internal sound effects would stay internal."

Tori sighed at him; she knew better than to ask where any internal screaming was coming from, because Flint did not tell tales. He never had, and she didn't expect that to change. He was a tortured, tormented soul, and there was no hiding that much, but why he was a tortured, tormented soul would probably remain a mystery to all but Flint. "Well, in any case, it's simple enough to put a stop to it. Just plug in a boob and the baby does the rest."

Flint's face contorted between confusion and humor. "Plug in? What the hell, Tori?"

Seeing that, she laughed. "You know medically, breast tissue is

mainly mammary glands, which, under the correct hormonal circumstances, produce a fatty liquid. And according to what I read, it's supposedly me giving him my immune system until he develops his own."

"Which is a hoot and a half considering you haven't got one," Flint put in. "I'm gonna be anemic at this rate."

"Don't be silly; as much as I can tell," Tori began, apparently waking up to rise to the challenge of a scientific lecture, "_your_ condition is genetically based. Mine was induced; I did used to have a perfectly functional immune system, you know. And as much of an inconvenience as this little guy is gonna be for a while, he is just as much _your_ son as he is mine. Which means, he's got a fifty-fifty chance of turning out just like you."

"What, medically speaking?"

Tori nodded. "Your brother told me that your father had a similar condition, although less potent. There were tales of the trait farther up the line than him, too, all in varying degrees of severity."

Flint shook his head. "Frank talks too much."

"Frank spent thirty years in the military fighting aliens just so he could see you again, Flint, don't be ungrateful. Besides, having a little background on what to expect fromâ€¦ ah, hell, he needs a name." She blew a tired raspberry, turning back to see the baby. "â€¦ problematic."

"Why?" Flint asked, seemingly genuinely curious.

"Mainly," Tori answered, turning back to look at Flint, "because I've never given anyone or anything a name before in my life, and the one I give my kid is going to be stuck on him for the rest of his life. He's a dumb little shit-factory now, but in ten, twenty, thirty years from now, he's just as functional and viable as the next human being. That's a lot of pressure."

To that, Flint actually gave a crinkled smile that touched his eyes. "Nice."

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"Junior" turned out to be a decent inspiration for a name, or that's what Flint supposed, when Tori finally came back with an actual name for their baby; because it turned out to be "Jonas". Flint didn't feel one way or the other about it, but while it was nice to finally have something to call the kid besides "the baby", he chose not to make any offerings just so Tori wouldn't change her mind about it and leave Flint confused as to what to call him.

To Flint, this was the most efficient and straightforward way to deal with the situation. It made him feel lucky that the cat had come with a name already, solving the issue before it could begin. If only babies came out of the womb wearing nametags, too. Oh well.

Jonas, as it were, surely did not know the meaning of the concept of shutting the hell up, however, and after the first bawling session

that appeared to have no origin " and no solution, either " Flint had retreated to the bridge in search of silence. Tori appeared to have slightly more patience for that behavior, although she had been the one doing all the research of what to do with baby humans. Flint wondered if he ought to have looked over some of that material himself, now the kid was out; never once in all his galactic travels had he encountered something that could emit such a piercing, muscle-rending sound.

The worst part, though, was it wasn't something he could use a gun to solve. Adapting to yet another change in ship life was going to be long and arduous, but adapting to extra " and useless " crew would probably be worse. He had briefly wondered why nobody had seen fit to warn him what kind of impediment to action this was going to be; first being pregnant had physically stopped Tori from fitting inside her Mjolnir, thus taking her out of commission. Now, simple maintenance to keep the baby alive and healthy was going to continue to prevent her from reentering the combat theater, which meant Flint was going to be a one-man wonder for a lot longer than he'd originally guessed; being small enough to fit back into her armor would probably take a handful of weeks " or months, who knew " but getting the kid to a place where he didn't need hourly access to his mother was, according to Tori, going to take _years_.

Or, at least one.

Sitting down at the helm, Flint discovered the silence of the bridge did not actually possess the solace it had advertised upon entry; there was a message from ONI HQ, and just from the title of the encrypted file, it looked a little angry.

Feeling deflated and defeated even before he'd begun, Flint typed his way through the decryption and opening process to display the message it contained, and find out what ONI was upset about now. Didn't they know now was not a good time? Well, no, how could they? Flint hadn't exactly been honest with them, lately.

Personal ignorance might be bliss under certain circumstances, but the ignorance of others to one's personal circumstances certainly was not; reading down through the message, Flint's brows crawled closer and closer together until they almost touched over his nose; He spared a couple of fingers to rub the wrinkle when it started to throb, but the frown felt somehow permanent.

ONI had just gotten flagged by a hellacious distress call from the colony they had sent him to, because _someone_ had seen a Spartan II in action, and _someone_ had told the locals that the reason he was there was because there was a Flood infestation in the neighborhood. The reports had been believed as credible because there was a Spartan II on the ground. The resulting pandemonium from the colonists all clamoring to get away before that theoretical infestation came their way was something to behold, apparently, and now Flint was in trouble for having propagated the lie.

He wasn't sure what lie they thought they were referring to, because while he didn't recall everything about the small pocket of Flood on his last op, he was pretty sure he hadn't been dreaming that. What did the desk jockeys back at ONI HQ know about Flood on the ground? Flint was the one who had actually seen, met, fought with and been defeated by the parasite. If anyone would know Flood when they saw

it, it would be Flint.

Right?

In any case, there were new orders attached; he, and Tori, and the _Whispers_, had just been called in. Flint imagined there would be the usual rigor of medical checkups and system diagnostics and the memory chips from the helmet cams pulled for review—but it presented a brand new problem.

Tori's pregnancy was an unknown to ONI, and randomly presenting a brand new baby without ever having admitted to any of it would look really, really bad. There might be ominous words, like _retirement_, spoken. Being decommissioned from the field was something Flint had done his best to avoid; the coping mechanisms he'd discovered for handling his deteriorating condition were all tied very tightly to his work.

The suit, the fighting, the fresh environments every week. He needed that—shoveling Tori out of bed at two in the morning or being woken up by her kicking him off of her from the middle of a half nelson were not the worst things he'd found himself doing, lately.

Flint rubbed his eyes, feeling old and tired. He had no idea how to handle ONI's newest request. Tori looked pretty bad, baby out and done with or not. There would be no hiding her condition—likely no hiding his, either. And where could they hide the baby, on top of everything else? Problems, problems, and no solutions were forthcoming.

Nightmarish echoes danced at the edges of his eyes, even when closed, but now there were new elements included that he had thought, had hoped, were locked solidly away. He'd never heard the Sangheilian infant cry, possibly not because it hadn't done any but because the sound of battle was louder, but it felt the same. Frankly being near the infant scared him; he had no idea what he was going to do, living long-term with the kid.

Now ONI was behaving like the Brute Chieftain, but this time was different. Again, not a problem he could solve with a gun. Everything was coming crashing down, all because _someone_ didn't believe the one qualified guy to know what he saw when he saw it.

An abrupt sound woke him from his brooding, and he about snapped right out of the chair. Turning to see the extent of the room, Flint stopped when he found Tori standing there —remarkably enough, sans baby.

She looked worried. "Flint, you're a mess."

The greeting didn't help. "ONI just issued a recall. We have to go in to base main."

The update changed her expression almost instantly. "What? Why?" She seemed a little unsteady on her feet, but she wasn't moving for the other chair in the room. "Wait—what are we going to do about Jonas? Did they find out about him? Is that why we got called in?"

Flint shook his head, almost able to count time in the spaces between heartbeats again; she'd spooked him, and spooked him bad. It didn't always end this pleasantly, either. Forcefully, he stilled his shaking arms, keeping them rigid at his sides. They wanted something to grab, something to kill. Killing things made him feel better. Let him focus. Made him think that maybe he was still sane. "No, they don't know. Someone sent in a Flood report. ONI is antsy."

She visibly relaxed. Her eyes stitched across the keys on the consoles behind him for a moment, before lifting back to his face with a new question. "What are we going to do about Jonas, though, if we're going in?" If ONI didn't know about the child yet, they would surely find out if he came along for the ride back to HQ.

"I don't know," Flint admitted, feeling weak. The frown stuck on his face was beginning to hurt, but it still wouldn't come loose. Problems he wasn't even sure how to tackle were multiplying, and it was making his head swim. He felt his hands coming up, so he ran them over his own head to give them something to do.

Strangling Tori was not going to help; it would probably just get him kicked in the guts and locked in a storage bay for a few hours. She folded her arms over her chest, looking pensive. "Is there anyone we could leave him with who would give him back?"

Flint's mind spun in a dizzying direction, but he got his hands to come back down again. Letting his arms go totally limp helped; dropping his shoulders too just rippled tension back in, though, and he felt his fists clench. Pain seared in sideways, and he realized he had his jaw set when his teeth began to ache. Regardless of species, regardless of parentage, babies always seemed to come with a hefty box of bad news attached to them. Seeking counsel on how to handle that seemed like a good idea. 'Taramée would know what to do with a baby â€" right?

Tori's waving hand in front of his face distracted him for a moment, and he looked at her. "Who's 'Taramée?" she was asking.

A shadow crossed Flint's face, but it disappeared quickly. He swallowed. "You're shitting me."

Tori gave him an incredulous look. "Why would I know who 'Taramée is, Flint? You don't talk about your past with me."

He shook his head. He knew she'd met the overgrown oaf at least once, but it had been a brief encounter and he couldn't remember if he'd bothered to introduce the two. "I didn't think that had come out, aloud."

"Well, it's out, and apparently this 'Taramée fellow has experience in babies, so out with the rest of it. Is that really an option? Is there really someone we can trust?"

Flint exhaled. For a single, shining moment, all was still. All he could see, all he could feel, was the stillness of the control deck, the cool, recycled air, and Tori. Just Tori. No spinning horrors, no shuddering nightmarish ghosts clawing at his consciousness. It was, he realized, an option. Maybe not a good one, maybe not the one he ought to choose, but it was an option, something other than confessing to ONI.

"Flint, don't do this to me." Tori insisted, stepping closer and resting her hands on his shoulders. "Come on, what's going on with you? Should I be worried?"

He forcibly dropped the tension in them, but when he met her gaze again he knew she'd felt him drop it; doubtless she could see the anguish too, even though it wasn't on his face. "Just an old friend. From a long time ago." The truth was, 'Taramée was the biggest damn Elite Flint had ever met, and he'd chosen the warrior for his strike team back on Delta Halo when the Schism was just getting started. 'A long time ago' was an understatement; it had been several years.

'Taramée was one of many Elites Flint had been adopted by; and he was, in part, responsible for Flint's Sangheilian name. A moment of peace crept into the chaos abruptly at the recollection that he still had that name; like a temporary balm, the one fond memory amid a storm of trauma bubbled up, and the wrinkle between his brows relaxed just a bit. _My name is 'Zelisee._ He had said that, once, to Lord Hood. And for a time, he had truly believed it. But nobody had called him that in what felt like ages, and it had almost faded completely. Perhaps it was time the Sangheilian legend made a reappearance.

"We should get airborne leave orbit. I'll drop him a call in slipspace and hope he answers. If anyone can pull this off for us, it's 'Taramée." With that said, Flint turned back to the controls, and sat back down, reaching for the interface and spooling up the engines.

Tori found the sudden resolution and confidence almost as alarming as the rush of haunting shadows behind his eyes from earlier; but it was something, and at least he wasn't going to attack her. She made a mental note to bring up his old Elite buddies more often; they seemed to distract him from the terror that followed his every step.

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Once the _Whispers_ made slipspace, Flint parked it and started broadcasting. Despite ONI's urgent recall order, Flint was disinclined to hurry to the specified coordinates. He wanted to see 'Taramée first. He spent most of his time just sitting on the bridge, although he did take time out to clean and put away his armor and weapons from the last op. Tori seemed suddenly a merciful creature, keeping the infant away from him.

Or maybe she felt a need to protect the kid from him; Flint was not the most stable individual, even on his good days. Other than the initial show-and-tell, he hadn't even really seen the boy, but after the terrible reaction he'd encountered the first time around, Flint was not exactly enthusiastic to try again. Whether Tori understood that or if she didn't was honestly immaterial; either way, the current situation worked out alright.

Part of him wasn't sure what he would say to 'Taramée when the big Elite turned up " part of him wasn't sure the warrior even would show up. Three days passed, slowly, like syrup, and Tori seemed to slowly gravitate back towards the onboard gym. Her sessions seemed unusually short, but she went back a lot. Very often he could hear

her complaining loudly at the weights and cables, bitching about how she had never ever been that badly out of shape before in her life; even aboard the asteroid laboratory where he had found her, she had frequented the gym and kept in shape.

Apparently, being pregnant hadn't permitted her to do very much of anything, and recovering from it was a frustrating process. Flint did his best not to go in there when she was working; it sounded like an invitation to a fight he did not want to have.

Finally, feeling that maybe 'Taramee was never going to answer, and unwilling to further irritate ONI by being excessively late, Flint chose a halfway point to the indicated coordinates and dropped the sloop out of slipspace. It was a good way to pop back up on radar and show he was making progress in the general direction of obedience, but he was certainly in no hurry to actually arrive quite as yet.

He'd been sitting there for about ten minutes " long enough to stop paying attention to the readouts " when the com pinged an incoming tightbeam signal. The sound was neither loud nor harsh, but it still startled him enough to make him grab the chair so he wouldn't fall out of it.

"Damn!" Flint swore, looking quickly over the readouts. Opening the channel, he waited a moment, listening, to see what was going on.

"_Great legends speak themselves across the aeons, and are carried by the hearts of those left in the breaking waves of time. Dreams of memory and the fire of souls, the preservation of history, for honor, and pain of growth."_

Flint felt himself laugh before he realized he was going to. "Waxing poetic, now, are we?"

"_Did you understand it?_" Came the answer.

Flint rubbed an eyebrow, a little puzzled. "'Taramee, I'm guessing."

"_In fairness, 'Zelis, you did call me._ _When legends beckon, those honored to hear the call, answer it._"

Flint shook his head, bemused and amused. "Alright, then. But what's with the poetry?"

There was a sound something like a harrumph, but from the over-long throat of a Sangheilian. "_It is useless, I am told, to try explaining its worth to those who do not appreciate it._ _I am curious to know, however, what is so urgent an event that even the great 'Zelis would cry for aid for three solar days without ceasing. And to me, specifically, at that._"

Flint felt his cheeks redden. He'd forgotten how very high the pedestal the Elites had put him on was; and he'd also forgotten how embarrassing it could be, trying to get them to stop gaping at him in awe. "'Taramee, this is serious."

"_I would imagine,_" the Shipmaster agreed. "_But that does not, even

still, explain the reason for that call. Why am I here, 'Zelis? What has happened?_"

"Logistical problems, 'Taramée," Flint admitted, kneading his brow with both thumbs at once. "Tori had her baby, and ONI doesn't know about it."

The next sound that was not a word that came through the line sounded like startled choking. "_Astonishing! So even the legendary 'Zelis is not immune to the wiles of the females; I had heard you had chosen a mate; I was unaware you had fathered young. Such prestige, to be the offspring of a warrior of such honor._"

Flint rolled his eyes. "Whateverâ€¦ look. We've been recalled. I wondered if you knew of a safe place we could leave the baby until ONI was done with us."

Silence.

" 'Taraméeâ€¦? "

It took several seconds more, but the Elite finally did answer. He was quieter, and sounded reserved; "_I know of such a place._"

Flint breathed out, a little relieved. "I don't know why I didn't think you would, but it's good to know you do. Listenâ€¦"

"_ 'Zelis, spare me,_" the Shipmaster issued, sounding a little stern. "_I know what you are asking. I will grant your offspring the sanctuary it requires for as long as it is needed. I have not forgotten the same that you did for me, once._"

Flint's brows raised. "Oh, don't tell me, let me guess; it's an honor thing."

"_Quite so. You needn't ask this favor of me, 'Zelis; the favor has already been granted. It is an honor, in itself, that you would come to me with this in the first place. It shows, for as little as you wish to admit, that you are truly more one of us than you are one of the Humans. It is why we call you brother. The soul does not care what appearance you wear._"

Flint felt himself nodding. "â€¦ thanks." After another look across the readouts, he added, "Wait, so where are you?"

"_Esel, lift camouflage. 'Zelis will be bringing his small vessel aboard briefly._"

At first, Flint opened his mouth to reply, but then shut it again without a word, as an old Covenant cruiser-class ship materialized out of nothingness across his sensor array. 'Taramée had been speaking to a crewman on his own command deck, just then, and not to Flint. He felt his face smile for him at the sight; 'Taramée was wrong about one small detail.

Flint truly did feel more at home among the Elites than he did with his own species, of late. Since the Schism, ONI's mission parameters had shifted from simple Human preservation to darker, more ominous enterprises, and even Flint wasn't sure where they thought they were going with that thought. The Sangheilian race, conversely, had stayed

just as straight and narrow and tightly honorbound as ever. Only the rabid xenophobia had been discarded, leaving the rest to shine how it ought.

"_Zelis, you may dock your vessel in the open bay. You should see an indicator for it on your sensors._" 'Taramée added, after the ship was done materializing.

Flint gave a soft whistle. "Cloaking tech has gotten a little better since the war, eh, 'Taramée?"

"_It has not changed. Your technology still has not caught up,_" the Shipmaster answered, coy. "_If memory serves, you never could detect us when we chose to conceal ourselves._"

To that, the Spartan II did laugh, a genuine expression of genuine amusement. "Aw, you know you couldn't hide all that effectively for all that long, big guy. We always seemed to find you out." He steered the _Whispers_ toward the indicated docking bay; the cruiser was big enough to fit a thousand sloops of that size inside it, with plenty of room to knock them about inside left over. Having a couple of bays for smaller spacefaring ships didn't seem that unusual, given the enormity of what he was docking with. "Speaking of if memory serves," Flint continued, "wasn't your ship a hell of a lot smaller the last time we met?"

"_To borrow a Human phrase, 'Zelis, do not sully my bluster before I have a chance to boast it. It is crude for warriors to discuss the relative sizes of their ships._"

To that admission, Flint just snickered.

.

Artemis walked in first, the moment the door slipped open, her skinny little tail held high. Flint paused in the doorway to watch her walk away, weaving through the legs of the exercise equipment bolted to the floor all over the room. In all his travels and all his experiences, he had never once imagined he'd wind up having a tiny little housecat adopt him. There were days when he felt more fond of the cat than of Tori, but that was mainly because the cat was a simple creature, and Tori had an innate love of overcomplicating everything.

Now there was the added complication of Jonas, and heavens only knew how he was going to cope with _that_. Flint struggled just to figure out _how_ to react, let alone choose between any selection of reactions. Tori, at least, seemed to be trying to return to her normal physique. Being able to fit into her Mjolnir again would certainly be a boon, but her belly hadn't been the only thing about her shape to change over the course of the pregnancy; Flint wasn't sure how she planned on solving all of her hormone-related shape changes, but she seemed to be willing to give the usual gound pounder's old method a try.

At current, she was pulling down on the handles of a machine designed to tighten the core; her weakest point, apparently, given what she looked like while trying to use it. Stepping out of the doorway at last, Flint slowly approached where she was. Past the stack of secured free weights, he spotted that familiar birds-nest bundle of

blankets, in the center of which squirmed the baby.

For once, he was quiet, his little eyes wide like he was in shock but the rest of his chubby face merely suggesting mild interest. Grabbing one of his own feet, he tried to push it into his mouth, but the hand he was using to do it with got in the way. The entire posture served to block his view of Flint, though, and when his foot got free he fell flat again. There was no indication of whether he was doing any of that deliberately or not, and Flint wasn't sure if he really wanted to ask.

Tori, spotting him, used the visitation as an excuse to stop what she was doing and rest for a moment. Resisting the retraction of the handles she'd been pulling on until it came to a gentle rest, she let go of it and paused to mop her face with a handy towel she'd had draped over one knee.

"Hey, fancy seeing you here." She greeted.

Flint looked up at her, feeling mixed. "Found him."

"Found who?" Tori asked, adopting a puzzled expression.

"'Taramée. I just docked us to his ship."

She sat up straight, rolling the towel between her hands until it was a tight ball. "Did you talk to him about the problem? What did he say?"

"He said he'd takeâ€¦ Jonasâ€¦ for as long as we needed him to."

After a wash of anguish passed across her face, Tori nodded, assenting. "Good call, I guess. Does he know how to care for a human child, though?"

Flint shrugged. "I have no idea. I'm sure you can give him all the scientific data he never wanted to know on the topic, though, given what you had to say to _me_ about it."

Tori scrunched her face at him, standing up, stepping out of the seat on the machine and circling to where the baby lay. By that point Artemis had found him, climbed inside the blanket nest and had been grabbed by a handful of fur on the side of her neck.

Tori pulled Jonas' fingers open, set the cat aside, and promptly lifted the entire assembly up into her arms. Freed, Artemis darted for the door, pawing at it once she arrived when it failed to open automatically. "You know, I was keeping her out of here for a reason," Tori said, to Flint.

"Reasons that were not disclosed," Flint reminded her. "She follows me everywhere, even into the shower. Come on, let's get this overwith." He turned towards the door.

The cat looked relieved to see it was just Flint when he scooped her up, but her tail was still twitching back and forth as she watched Tori and the baby from over his shoulder. Flint led them back to their quarters, however, and deposited the cat on the bed.

"What are we doing in here?" Tori asked, puzzled. "I thought we were going to go meet this splitlip friend of yours."

Flint grimaced at her, pulling open the Mjolnir locker door. "Elites appreciate recognizable position and rank, Tori. Odds are if I show up without my armor on most of them won't know who I am, and I just don't have the patience today to spend endless hours re-introducing myself. That and some of them still seem to think 'Zelis is a lizard like them."

Tori hiccupped. "Wait, should I put mine on, too?"

Flint shrugged, dismissive. "If you want to."

Suddenly feeling small and exposed, Tori hurriedly put her bundle of baby and blankets down on the bed next to the cat, and promptly pulled her armor locker open too. Artemis didn't try to interact with the baby again, allowing both Spartans to dress in silence. Tori had to stop with her skinsuit around her hips, though, and procure an ace wrap to try and do something about the remains of her empty baby belly. It hurt to crush it inward like that, but leaving it loose just wasn't going to work.

Flint had to help her with sealing the skinsuit, and again with the upper torso armor plating, but she was able to do the rest by herself. Apparently, the space allotted for her breasts wasn't quite right anymore either, and it had taken some rather comical looking adjusting once in to make it sit correctly.

By the time Tori was finished, she looked only mildly thick about her middle, and totally back to normal everywhere else. Flint caught himself smiling at the image she cut; there was nothing quite like having one's battle buddy back again. When Tori saw it, though, she responded with a sheepish grin, and her cheeks reddened. "What?" She demanded, embarrassed.

Flint shook his head, declining to comment. He just dropped the helmet down over his head and sealed it down. When the HUD came up, he saw Tori fastening her own helmet down, too. "Ready when you are," he reported.

"Should we get some guns, or is that too much?"

"Oh," Flint mumbled, considering the question. "Uh, sidearms, maybe. No. Your combat knife should be enough. This isn't a combat op." He shook his head.

Tori nodded, reaching up to touch the knife he'd mentioned once before turning to see about her baby. She was delicate with her handling of the unprotected infant, aware her motions were augmented and empowered by her armor, but she still managed to jostle him enough to make him set up bawling again.

Flint tolerated it for a moment, long enough to hear Tori start trying to shush him, before he remembered he had his armor on, now, and could shut that crap out with the touch of a button. Relief flooded in when the sound cut off abruptly. Jonas' wrinkled face and gaping mouth indicated he wasn't done complaining yet, but Flint couldn't hear it and that was good enough for Flint. The expression on the baby's face eventually did relax somewhat, and it took until

then for Tori to decide she was ready to go.

Artemis darted away into the depths of the ship when the trio left the quarters, but that was fine; she would probably just take a severe disliking to the Elites on the other ship anyway. Flint could feel each step, every subtle shift and slip of his armor moving around him. The subtle tug of the machine accelerating his every action, both balanced and non. As he neared the hatch, an itch formed in the back of his mind that insisted he shouldn't go through that door without a rifle on his back and a magnum on his thigh. He kept walking.

The picture visible through the visor of his helmet was different from that which could be seen when he wasn't wearing anything on his head; the world looked a little narrower, but more revealed. He could see the slowly gathering dots outside the ship as the Elites milled forward, without formation. It had been almost an hour since setting the ship down, and no one had emerged. Perhaps some of them were starting to wonder why.

At the interior airlock door, the control to open it would simultaneously extend the ramp to the bay floor on the outside. Tori joined him at the second door, and both waited for a count of three breaths while the system cycled and the interior door had a chance to shut. The exterior airlock would open automatically, with the instruction Flint had given it; when it slid back, a sea of upturned Sangheilian faces was beyond it, greeting them in total silence.

Abject terror stabbed through him, and for a moment, Flint did not move; he stared at them, stared them down, willing himself to move. Warriors had not gathered before him like this since Delta Halo, when he had first been introduced to, and brought down by, the Flood. It was not the time he had contracted the problematic infection, but it had been raking claws and flashing muzzle fire, the roar of explosions, screaming, small-arms' fire and rockets.

Phantom pain crawled up the Spartan's spine from the location where that rocket had struck him, effectively ending his participation in the fight. Eleven months of surgical reconstruction and brutal rehabilitation had followed that fight. It had been, he'd learned much later, worth the cost. The Flood had bypassed Earth and what little remained of the Human race was left to rebuild however it could. Finally, the surge was past; and Flint took his first step forward since seeing the gathered members of 'Taramee's crew.

They resembled that old crowd in a way Flint could not shake. Perhaps it was the inherent knowledge that somewhere amid their population was, at the very least one, of the selfsame warriors that had been there on that day.

Standing at the top of the ramp to the floor of the bay, Flint scanned their faces, looking for anyone familiar. Anyone he had a name for. None presented themselves, but several looked painfully alike to faces he had never asked the names of. Breathing out, he strode slowly down, his perspective sinking until it matched theirs, and the hollow, resonating ache subsided.

Tori appeared in his peripheral, showing that she had followed his lead almost perfectly. Step out, stop. Walk down the ramp, stop. One

of the near individuals' jaws flexed, and Flint remembered to turn his exterior sound back on. What came through was the last of what he remembered as a typical greeting; but it was in Sangheilian, and despite the visor, Tori looked like she was trying to shoot the guy dead with her eyes.

Flint made a gesture of looking around at the assembled warriors again, then followed the motion with, "Where is your Shipmaster?"

Eyes drew slowly from Tori, from the baby in her Mjolnir-clad arms, and seemed to drool over Flint. It was the least unsettling thing he'd had to endure thus far, however, and he let them do it.

None currently present looked terribly inclined to answer, but they did form a path down their middle when another fellow came striding into the room, one of those looks on his grizzled split-chinned face. If he could find something to be pissed off about, then he would be pissed off in very short order " but for the moment, he was still looking.

"Who's this?" the Spartan-II asked.

As if in response, newcomer spoke to one of the fellows standing near to him, asking, "I have heard many great tales of the honor and prowess of this 'Zelis, and now I hear this warrior is aboard our mighty vessel; where is he hiding, and why have I not seen this icon of perseverance?"

Flint folded his Mjolnir-clad arms over his chest. For all intents and purposes, Tori looked like she was frozen to the spot; blessedly, the baby was silent, staring with those wide eyes of his at all the shiny armor and dark, reptilian creatures around them.

Instead of answering aloud, the guy farthest from him within their cluster just gestured inward towards the group; when the newcomer's gaze traveled through them, one by one they gestured him onward, until all that remained at the end to go to was Flint. Instead of acknowledging the Human's presence, he instead adopted a grumpy look; "Do not play games with me, brothers! If he is not here, simply say as much."

"He's right in front of you," the one just off Flint's elbow informed the guy, his voice, his tone, even his accent tugging ugly strings of memory out of the Spartan. "You looked right at him; he's particularly hard to miss."

That earned the fellow the newcomer's full attention, but again, he ignored Flint entirely. "Every warrior I look to here waves me onward, none claim his honored name. Is he invisible?"

"Not at all," the warrior answered, and dropped a four-fingered hand over Flint's leading shoulder, clearly and undoubtedly indicating him. The gesture " the way it was executed " finally cinched it. Here was one of the warriors who had followed Flint into the Flood's maw, so many tortured years before. He looked old, scarred, beaten" not terribly unlike Flint himself. "This is he."

Finally, the new guy looked straight at Flint, rather than past or through him. And then he got a very disgusted look on his face that

Flint recognized; it was that same look that a whole lot of the Sangheilian race wore whenever a Spartan showed up on the battlefield pre-Schizm. Apparently, the idea that they had been so completely outmatched and that all they had accomplished and bled for until then was moot because the Spartans had a habit of clearing entire fields of opposition, even if there was only one lonely Spartan onsite to do it.

"A Human?!" the newcomer roared, indignant. Looking back at the Elite who had indicated Flint as the so-named, he fumed visibly. "How dare you defile the name of a great and powerful warrior with this blatant lie of his identity! No Human could bear a Sangheilian name, and none ever shall!"

"Hey, I earned that," Flint said, finally speaking up. The Elite next to him had solidly proven his identity as one of the handful of actual brothers he counted among the reptilian race; defending him felt natural. "Got blown to hell earning that name."

Rounding on Flint again, the newcomer snarled. "I will punish you for these lies, vermin! I do not know how you convinced these shallow-minded few that you were one of our greatest, but I will set them straight â€" _after_ I have removed your head from your honorless hide!"

The declaration left Flint feeling more than just a little insulted â€" 'Zelis was, after all, one of the facets of his long and tormented past that had helped to hold his fracturing mind together. Having a genuine brotherhood restored to him after being stripped of his first fellowship had served as a balm like no other. For a time, it had assuaged the madness that still creeped in the darkest corners.

When the new guy swung, Flint flung an arm up and forced him to miss, redirecting the entire arm. With that same hand he grabbed the two mandibles on that side of the guy's face, right out of the middle of a roar, and promptly pounded him in the head with the other fist until he felt one of the jaws dislocate; as if fueled by the pain with a need to defeat him, the Elite grabbed him around the armored collar under his helmet, and tried to lift him right off the floor. Doing that with a Marine or an ODST had worked since the beginning of the 30 years war. Doing that with a half-ton of Mjolnir armor wrapped around a man an entire head taller and significantly greater in depth and breadth was a whole other matter.

Flint felt the lifting motion, though, and memories of being torn to pieces by the augment that he had not known was an augment until the last minute flashed through his forebrain; his estimation of Elite capabilities was skewed thanks to that one horrifying encounter, and he did not trust that this lunatic could not, in fact, pick him up and throw him across the room. Thoughts of the other Elites â€" his friends, his comrades-at-arms, his brothers â€" and of Tori â€" the only soul brave or stupid enough to stay at his side through thick and thin â€" stabbed through his mind like lightning bolts, flashing in and out of existence as he weighed the task at hand, and what he had to do to bring this enemy down and keep it from hurting any of them.

In response, he gathered the fingers of his free hand into a spearheaded point, and promptly shoved the entire hand right into the

guy's gaping mouth. He choked, eyes bugging out, and tried to withdraw, but Flint had a firm hold of half his mouth in the other hand.

Pulling mightily on that side of the guy's head, Flint forced his thick, armor-plated arm down the horse-length throat, all the while weathering down punching, swatting, clawing and raking from both the guy's arms. He even kicked both feet a little, struggling to get loose. The entire lower half of his head had deformed, and the lip of his throat between the two jaw sets had torn. Bubbly purple blood trickled in thin lines from the wound, but it was likely a whole other story down where Flint's diving hand was.

He could feel the soft tissues tearing and rending around his angular armor plates, bronchial tubes shredding and collapsing, esophagus tearing away and shrugging down atop the stomach. There at the top of the apex of the bronchial connection, though, he found one of the two hearts he'd learned to shoot out of their chests at an early age. When he grabbed it, its beat stuttered, and the Elite's bugged eyes suddenly purpled with bulging blood vessels. If he could have made any sound at that point, he likely would have.

At about the time Flint tore the heart from its cradle between the Sangheili's lungs and began to withdraw his arm, the offending warrior sank to his knees, evidently finally out of blood-oxygen content and unable to replenish due to the size of the blockage in his neck. A terrible, fleshy tearing sound followed Flint's arm out as it came back to the light, and in his hand was what remained of a mangled heart with the upper arterial connections strung out and torn, dangling between Flint's hand and the guy's mouth as a weak reminder of where it had come from.

His arm was a dark arterial purple from the elbow down, but with the removal of the major pump organ, that same blood was now pouring out the Elite's mouth in silent observation. He stared up at Flint for a few seconds more as he bled to death internally, and finally toppled to his side on the decking at his feet.

Flint threw the torn heart at the body, a little disgusted; Elite blood was mildly corrosive, and likely by the time he got back to the Whisper it would have pitted the surface of his armor. When he looked up, though, absolutely nobody was moving. He had everyone's undivided attention, however, and he suddenly felt very small.

"â€|uh."

"Under normal circumstancesâ€|" one of the farthest observing began, pausing to cough and tear his eyes from the blood-vomiting corpse with the bugged-out, bloodshot eyes, "under normal circumstances, the victor in a battle of honor would take the place of the deceased, since he was anâ€| uh, in a commanding position aboard the ship."

Another suddenly jumped in, as if afraid of where that would go; "But considering these unique circumstances, I think it would be better proper if we dealt with the gap in command ourselves."

"No," the first countered, casting his companion a look. "In accordance with the codes of Sangheilian honor, he must choose his

successor himself. He is ineligible for 'Derin's position because he is Shipmaster of his own vessel, and commander of his own crew. But he is 'Zelis; he is still one of us. Therefore he must be given the right to choose."

Flint relaxed visibly. "Whew."

"I think some cautionary tales should be added to the legend of the great 'Zelis," one of the ones standing next to the Spartan mentioned. "That was horrible just to _watch_."

"And that," said a much deeper, much greater voice, turning all heads to see as the monstrous 'Taramee strode into the scene, "is why 'Zelis is legend, and not merely a hero of fading merit." The Shipmaster closed the gap between them, kicked the offending corpse aside to get it out of the way, and grabbed Flint firmly by his pauldrons. "It is good to see you again, old friend."

Flint felt suddenly weak, and all he could do was nod. No torment, no torture, no internal demon, could break the bonds he had made with this giant. Even the gaze from that other warrior to his side "the one he had never asked the name of" was understanding, and compassionate. Each of these warriors had been through much of the same and many similar events as he, and they all knew exactly what kind of wrestling match he performed with himself every single day.

Doubtless, each of them did the same thing too. 'Taramee dropped his hands, and turned past the Spartan in front of him. Flint looked that way, for just the briefest moments wondering why. Seeing Tori, clad fully in her armor, reminded him.

Why he was here, why he had needed to meet with the warriors he had begun to think he would never see again. Even through her Mjolnir, Flint could see she was shaking as she extended the blanket-bundled baby to the massive Elite. With a tenderness that belied his visage, 'Taramee cradled the bundle, first looking down at the boy and then up from him at the boy's mother. He towered over her, his broad frame dwarfing her willowy build worse than it did to Flint.

"You are stronger than you know," the Shipmaster told her, gently. "Mother, warrior, guardian of our greatest legend. Keep his back for us, Toh'rey. We will keep your young one safe."

She gave a faint nod, and whispered, "okay."

"Rest assured that none outside this vessel will know of his existence, or discover his presence. Go and do what must be done. When you are finished, call for us, and we will appear." The promise was emphasized by a resounding roar from his crew.

Tori looked, to Flint at least, distraught. The armor hid most of her from view, but some of the body language got through the cold, metal shell, betraying the hidden expression behind her polarized visor. She flinched visibly when Flint set a hand on her shoulder, as if all the focus she owned were contained on the bundle in 'Taramee's arms. As if the break of eye contact were the permission to proceed, the Shipmaster took that moment to turn, and walk back through the assembly of Sangheilian crew, ostensibly to return from where he'd come.

Flint closed his hand on the shoulder beneath it when he felt Tori lurch after him; he could feel her shaking, through that contact, but the added pressure seemed to remind her to be still. He wasn't sure what to make of the situation, but even without Tori there to show her own opinions of the matter, Flint felt a little torn, himself. The struggle to find headspace for an infant son inside a war machine had not, apparently, been entirely fruitless. The same instinct he had felt on the colony world of the boy's birth was now telling him that that massive Elite warrior was walking away with a piece of Flint in his arms.

It questioned Flint's trust in the Shipmaster's ability, and questioned the merit and wisdom of Flint's decision to give the child away. Tori, meanwhile, seemed to be having a full blown meltdown. Not for the first time in his lengthy career and undoubtedly not for the last, Flint was grateful for the armor.

To whatever extent it could, it was saving face for both of them. When 'Taramee made the far edge of the gathered crowd, Flint pulled Tori back up the ramp towards the airlock of the Whispers. The warriors below watched them leave in silence. As far as Flint could tell, their faces held no expressionâ€¦ no judgment. It was a small mercy, he knew, against the storm that was coming.

End
file.